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## **Mundum: a case study of Chintang ritual language**

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## CHAPTER TWO

### *MUNDUM:* A CASE STUDY OF CHINTANG RITUAL LANGUAGE

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#### 1. The *mundum*

The *mundum* is the oral tradition among the Kiratis in east Nepal, and it is also a long-standing, and ancient, though not unchanging, ritual practice. But it is very difficult to say what the *mundum* is exactly. There are many issues about the *mundum* which so far have remained untouched by systematic and scientific publications. However, there are a few groundbreaking studies - namely Allen 1978, Gaenzsle 2002 – and the present paper follows along these lines. The concept of the *mundum* can be illustrated by the famous story of the blind and the elephant. In the story there are some blind people who touched an elephant. Each of them touched different parts of the elephant and claimed that the elephant was a rope, a trunk of a tree, and winnowing tray (*nanglo*), when they touched the tail, leg and ear respectively. Similarly, the *mundum* is very varied because there are many versions. Nobody can easily say that the *mundum* is exactly this or that. When anybody studies the *mundum* in a particular community, clan, etc., he/she is only able to touch either the leg or tail or ear. So, conceptualizing the *mundum* adequately, we need to study it in a comparative perspective. But this is a difficult task and remains to be done.

The term *mundum* is generally pronounced as *mundhum* by Nepali speakers. Many researchers have documented the term *mundhum* in their research. The /dh/ sound in *mundhum* is not found in many Kirati languages. If it is

found in other Kirati languages, it often is a loan sound. The term *mundhum* thus might be of Nepali influence. So, the native term is *mundum*. In this case, the term *mundum* changes into the *mundhum* because the alveolar is changed into the dental aspirated /dh/ because it might be the influence of the Nepali language.

Although, the concept is the same, the term *mundum* has different variants among different groups of Kiratis. Gaenszle (2002: 40-42), who has done pioneering work in the field of Kirati ritual, has extensively studied about it and collected different terms, which are as follows:

mundum	Chintang, Bantawa, Belhare
muddum / muṁdum	Mewahang, Bantawa
muntum	Yakkha
mindum	Yamphu
mukdum	Sunuwar
ridum	Kulung
dum la	Chamling
diumla	Thulung
-pe-lam	Lohorung
- tṁmrṁ	Khaling (B.K. Rai 2005)

The term *mundum* can be glossed as 'oral tradition', 'ancestral knowledge', or - more generally - 'traditional way of life' (Gaenszle 2002: 31). In this way, its major feature is orality, which is a unique characteristic of the *mundum* as a whole. However, the *mundum* is interpreted by scholars in a number of ways.

The word Mundhum means the power of great strength and the Kirat people of east Nepal take it to be a true, holy and a powerful scripture. (Chemjong 2003).

In his interpretation, the term *mundum* (documented as the *mundhum*) refers to the strong power of the Kirati's 'holy scripture'. But the *mundum* is not a scripture because it is neither the holy writings of a religion nor a holy book. It is only an oral tradition.

Similarly, Chemjong writes about the two parts of the (Limbu) *mundum*, namely the Thungsap and the Peysap. The Thungsap is the oral tradition one and the term Peysap refers to the written books about religion (Chemjong 2003). This interpretation is problematic because only among the Limbu

there is – since relatively recently – a script. Among the Rai the *mundum* is not divided in an oral and a written section but it comes only in oral form, performed by knowledgeable elders spontaneously. So, it is a wrong generalisation to divide the *mundum* into oral and written traditions. Its original form is that of oral practice.

### 1.1. The *mundum* language

Normally, language is, no doubt, used as a means to an end. No language is superior and inferior to others in terms of its functions, but languages are made inferior and superior to each other by language ideologies, e.g. a governments' policy. The language used among human beings is called human language or language only. Similarly, the language which is used to address the superhuman beings (gods/deities/ancestors) is often called a divine language (e.g. Skt. deva-bhāṣā). The *mundum* language is also seen as a divine language, which is unlike the day to day language. It is used only for superhuman beings, like the ancestors, or special ritual ceremonies where the ancestors are evoked. The *mundum* language is different from the ordinary language in many respects, like the morphology of nouns, politeness register, chanting, etc. In the *mundum* language, archaisms can be found in nouns, but most of the verbs are ordinary. So, the nature of the *mundum* language is unique in comparison to the language used in ordinary communication. There are normally two types of the *mundum* language which are as follows:

#### 1.1.1. Ritual language

There are various types of *mundum* genres. Among them, the ritual genres are a major part (besides the narrative genres). The ritual language, as its name implies, is the language which is used in different kinds of rituals. It is used in the rituals for addressing the deities and ancestors and other purposes. The ritual language is chanted by ritual experts. These consist of shamans, knowledgeable elders, tribal priests, etc. In the *mundum*, rituals play a dominant role so the language used in the rituals also functions in a distinct manner.

In Chintang, there are only few knowledgeable elder people who can chant the ritual language and perform the rituals perfectly. The ritual language is on the verge of extinction. It is because not everybody can chant the ritual language, so after one to two more generations, it may become extinct. Therefore, it needs documentation and preservation.

Sometimes there is a confusion about the ritual language in relation to the *mundum* language. There is no doubt that the *mundum* and ritual language are closely linked. Broadly speaking, the ritual language is part of the *mundum* language, but if we examine more closely, we find that though all ritual language texts are part of the *mundum*, not all *mundum* texts are in ritual language. This is because the mythological narratives are part of the *mundum*, but recounted in ordinary language.

The ritual language is called *mundum* language because doing the rituals is also known as doing the *mundum* in Chintang, although the *mundum* includes also things other than rituals. But it is true that the rituals and ritual language cover the major part of the *mundum*. When Chintang experts perform the rituals and chant the language, they designate this as *mundum ihaiṛma* 'or chanting the mundum' (*mundum phalaknu N*) in their language.

In the ritual language, there are two types of speech. One is monologue and the other is dialogue. In the monologue, the human speakers address the superhuman deities or ancestors spontaneously. But the dialogues are different from monologic speech. They are conducted between two parties both of whom are human beings. Here, one party addresses the other party and the other party responds. This language is totally different from the ordinary language. For example, in a formal marriage, there is one ceremony which is called *bagdata*. In *bagdata*, there are two parties: one represents the bride's side and the other side represents groom's side. They can choose the appropriate language, Chintang or Nepali. It depends on their convenience. But they communicate in a way which is not common in ordinary speaking. The choice of words, grammar, style, symbolic meaning, and the use of metaphorical expressions makes the language different from ordinary use.

### **1.1.2. Shamanic language**

There are several types of tribal shamans. The shaman is neither a knowledgeable elder nor a priest. His role is different from these two. The shaman is different from ordinary people because only someone who is possessed by a divine being is called the shaman. When he/she is possessed by the divine being, he/she starts to tremble and chant in a special type of language. This language is called shamanic language which is different from both ordinary language and priestly ritual speech. In Kirati communities, the shaman plays a vital role.

In Chintang, there are many kinds of shamans. They are called Nangsuba, Chambak, Taluksung, Baidang etc. They are all mediums but their respective deities and roles are different. And the language of their chanting is different and mutually unintelligible to a large extent.

### 1.1.2.1. Nangsuba

The Nangsuba is a typical shaman in Chintang culture. When anybody starts to be possessed by the god, s/he must meditate – so it is said - in retreat for twelve years. It is believed that the Nangsuba is possessed by Budhahang's or his son Rajdeu's (*han*) spirit. As a Nangsuba, s/he sees everything in dreams and tries to remember in the day time. All the special knowledge is 'given' in dreams and s/he follows what s/he sees in the dream. It is very difficult to meditate for twelve years. After becoming a Nangsuba, s/he must follow certain rules. For example, there are rules which stipulate that Nangsubas never use shoes, eat only once a day, take bath daily, never carry any luggage in the head, etc.

In Chintang, there are two types of Nangsuba. One is the Budhahang Nangsuba and the other one is the Rajdeu Nangsuba. Normally, the Nangsuba chant the *mundum* language and after getting possessed they do divinations as well.

### 1.1.2.2. Chambak

The Chambak is another category of Chintang shamans which are also possessed by a deity. The Chambak also must meditate in retreat for six years after s/he is possessed by the deity. The Chambak, for his part, is related to the spirit of Budhahang's wife. Budhahang had five wives (L. Rai 2006). As a consequence, there could be five types of Chambak, but in Chintang there are in fact not five types of Chambak. One Chambak (BBR, Ban Bir Tuprihang Rai) also claims that Chambaks are linked to the spirit of Budhahang's wife (Chambak\_int.0263)<sup>1</sup>. But he distinguishes only two types of Chambak. One is from Narimhang (Chambak\_int.0231) and the other is from Budhahang (Chambak\_int.0234). The Chambak's task is not only to chant in the *mundum* language but also to act in various other roles, like diviner, healer, or leader of the death spirit (*bato lagaune*).

### 1.1.2.3. Taluksung

Taluksung is another category of shamans which is concerned with Budhahang's hunter spirit. The Taluksung also acts like the Chambak, but in Chintang his role is not as important as that of the Nangsuba and Chambak.

The language chanted by the shamans (Chambak, Nangsuba, Taluksung) is called shamanic language, which is natively known as *risiwa*. This *risiwa* which is also a part of the *mundum* language is the language appropriate for possession. Ordinary people can't chant and understand the *risiwa*, even if they are knowledgeable elders. The shamanic language can only be used by shamans. In Chintang, the shamanic language is chanted by all the tribal shamans (Chambak, Nangsuba, Taluksung, etc.) in their shamanic sessions which take place during a whole night on request or during the big cultural festival, the Wadhangmi. In these shamanic sessions, the shamans tremble, i.e. get possessed, and chant the shamanic language. It is rather difficult to understand the shamanic language, in comparison to the other kinds of ritual language. The person who chants the shamanic language cannot understand it himself to a great extent. It is very difficult to study this language, because it is not easy to record it in good quality, due to the drum's or cymbal's loud sound. So, we could not understand our recordings very clearly. The people do not pay much attention to it, in comparison to the other rituals. It is believed that the shaman uses different 'languages' to address the deities. One may doubt whether it is possible to use a different language or not. But, it is believed that it depends on their teacher (*guru*) and the deities. One of us (Ichchha P. Rai) asked many shamans about the use of different languages. Many of them said that there are several types of deities. And, they use the Bhote (Tibetan) language when they call the Bhote deity and Limbu language when they call the Limbu deity. It needs further clarification. In another enquiry about the understanding and memory of the language used in the shamanic performance, they said that they cannot remember well but understand perfectly, and they can interpret a few words. They told us that all these things are given in dreams and practiced gradually. When they feel any difficulty, they can ask their teacher but it is interesting that some have no teacher.

## 1.2. Chintang mundum/ritual language

All the data in this paper are from the ritual language. We can speak of Chintang *mundum*/ ritual language, though, as explained earlier, the

*mundum* and ritual language are not one and the same. There are several interesting features of the *mundum* language. They are as follows:

### 1.2.1. Use of binomials

The term binomial is proposed in the pioneering article by Nicholas Allen entitled ‘Sewela Puja Bintila Puja: notes on Thulung ritual language’ (1978). He uses the term binomial for a pair of ritual nouns in the Kirati rituals. On first sight, it might seem to be simply a case of reduplication or echo words, but this is not true because these words are different in many respects. Typically, binomials consist of two three-syllabic limbs, the last syllable of each limb being identical (Gaenszle 2002: 162). For example: *tuplachonj.berichonj* ‘tip of the banana leaf’ (Burhahang\_01.06). This is an example of a typical binomial. Besides these, there are other types of binomials which are different from the typical binomials. All of them can be studied by the helpful system of representation introduced by Allen (1978) and further developed by Gaenszle (2002:163). The system is suited well to study the binomials morpho-semantically. These features of the nouns make the ritual language distinct.

### 1.2.2. Pervasive parallelism in nouns (especially binomial)

In the Chintang *mundum*/ritual language, parallelism in nouns (binomials) is one of the most important features (Gaenszle et al. 2005). Parallelism is found on different levels of binomials, so one can speak of pervasive parallelism. There are parallel structures on different levels, namely the phonological, prosodic, morphological, syntactic and semantic.

On the phonological level, phonemes and syllables play a key role as these are structured in a parallel manner. For example:

1. *wa-roŋ.wa-toŋ* ‘knowledgeable elder’ [Burhahang\_01.26]
2. *sa-du.sa.tja-du.sa* ‘sacred meat’ [Burhahang\_02.59]

On the prosodic level, prosodic features play an important role in parallelism. In this case, the stress falls on the first syllable of each limb and makes it parallel in structure. For example:

3. ‘*so-loĩ-wa. lam-loĩ-wa* ‘calabash’ [Burhahang\_01.12]
4. ‘*aca. athuŋ* ‘eat and drink’ [Burhahang\_01.39]

On the morphological level, two parallel morphemes appear as each limb’s last syllable. For example:



5. tupla-choŋ.beri-choŋ ‘tip of the banana leaf’ [Burhahang\_02.06]

6. thaŋna-nŋŋ.meŋna-nŋŋ ‘friends and relatives also’  
[Burhahang\_01.17]

On the syntactic level, above the level of binomials, syntactically parallel structures are found. For example:

7. tupla-pheno.beri-pheno ‘spread the banana leaf’  
[Burhahang\_01.18]

tupla phes -no beri phes -no  
banana.leaf stretch -NPST banana.leaf stretch -NPST

8. casumta-apuŋso.chembita-apuŋso ‘provide crops and property’  
[Burhahang\_02.24-25]

casum ta a-puŋs -u chembi ta a-puŋs -u  
crops PTCL 2- produce -3P money PTCL 2- produce -  
3P

These examples show that each limb of a binomial can take the same verb and they are syntactically parallel in structure. But here these are no longer binomials in the strict sense, but binomials turned into sentences.

Semantic parallel structure is also possible. Semantics deal with the meaning aspect. The relation here is one of complementary, which can also be seen as parallel. For example:

9. poluwa.pakuwa ‘roasted and boiled’ [Burhahang\_01.39]

10. aca.athuŋ ‘eat and drink’ [Burhahang\_01.39]

### 1.2.3. Honorific form and construction

Many languages of Nepal have honorific forms in pronouns which are mapped onto the verb. Though in the Chintang *mundum*/ritual language, there is no honorific form there is a honorific function through the use of subjunctive verb forms (Gaenszle et al.: 2005). In Chintang, the tenseless verb form is a 'subjunctive', as described by Bickel et al. (2007), following the proposal in Bickel (1996) on a parallel form in Belhare. This form represents a higher level of politeness and thus a honorific function in the Chintang ritual language. In the ritual context, instead of using a straightforward imperative (which would be intrusive), a person addresses/requests the deities in the second person (sg/d/p) using an ordinary verb in subjunctive form. For example:

11. apuŋsum [wal\_yupung02.211]  
a-puŋs -u -m

2- produce -3P -2nsA  
 May you (pl) produce it (i.e. the crops).

### 1.2.4. High speed of incantation

In the Chintang *mundum*/ritual, incantation speed is high in comparison to others. Incantation speed is relatively slow in other Kirati groups. The Chintang way of incantation is comparable to Sanskrit and is possibly of brahmanical influence (Gaenzle et al. 2005). For example, we can look at the texts delivered by two knowledgeable elders. In the first text, Bal Bahadur Sangpang Rai, an elder, chanted 158 words within fifty seconds (wal\_yupung2). Similarly, in the second text, Dambar Bahadur Khukkhang Rai, an elder chanted approximately 216 words within a one minute and thirty nine seconds (rajdeu 2). Thus incantation speed is 3, 2 word per second in the first case, and 2, 2 words per second in the second case, which is quite impressive. Similarly, Bal Bahadur Sangpang Rai spoke approximately 60 words within the same time (fifty seconds) and Dambar Bahadur Khukkhang Rai spoke approximately 145 words in the same time (1.5 minutes). So, incantation speed is high.

### 1.2.5. Code mixing/switching

In the Chintang *mundum* language, there is considerable code mixing. It can be imagined that it did not happen so much in the past. When the Nepalese government pursued a monolingual policy and promoted the Nepali language as the official language, the Nepali language became more and more widely used. As a consequence the Nepali language influenced the ritual language as well. We can see a considerable amount of Nepali terms in the Chintang *mundum* language. When we observed in detail the text chanted by BBS (Bal Bahadur Sangpang, tara kancha), who is a knowledgeable elder, he used 42 Nepali words in the *mundum* text out of 141 words [wal\_yupung02; 1-28]. It constitutes approximately 30%. Thus it can be said that a considerable degree of code mixing is found in the *mundum* text. Similarly, in another text chanted by Chambak kancha BBR (Ban Bir Tuprihang Rai), he used 30 Nepali words out of 133 words [sud\_budohang; 1-20], which constitutes approximately 23%. So, these data indicate that code mixing depends also on the speakers and varies from person to person. The former speaker is only a knowledgeable elder and not a shaman, but the latter speaker is a Chambak, a tribal shaman. In this way, there is a difference between shamans and knowledgeable elders, or shamans and shamans, or knowledgeable elders and knowledgeable elders.

### 1.2.6. Used only by experts

The *mundum* language is not the common language of communication. It is only chanted by experts. In Chintang, there are different kinds of experts (see above), namely the medium and the knowledgeable expert. Those people who are mediums are also known as shamans. Shamans see everything in dreams and thus acquire their knowledge. Then, they only deepen their knowledge with the help of a *guru* (teacher). Similarly, another type of expert is the knowledgeable elder who gets the knowledge through learning and practice. A knowledgeable elder is known as *wattong* in the terminology of Chintang.

In Chintang, there are both types of experts. Nangsuba, Chambak, Taluksung are major types of mediums. They get possessed by the god/deity and tremble while playing their favourite instrument, like cymbal, drum, etc. They are, in the true sense, tribal shamans, and these are only found in Khalsa territory (i.e. in Dhankuta District), including Chintang. Similarly, *wattong*, or knowledgeable elders, can also chant the *mundum* language in most of the rituals, but not in all. A *wattong* is knowledgeable like the shamans, but never gets possessed. He/she never divines and heals in a shamanic session. Knowledgeable elders can chant the *mundum* language only while accompanying others in rituals.

### 1.2.7. Melody; musicality

The *mundum* language is full of melody. This language possesses a certain kind of musicality but it remains rather stable in rhythm. Pitch and intonation play a crucial role in chanting. The music found in the *mundum* language is quite unique and rare, but it remains to be studied in detail. It is totally different from modern music. It is traditional tribal music and used only in the context of *mundum* rituals. In the Chintang *mundum* language, the tune of the music is so fast that it is not comparable to other Kiratis' *mundum* language.

The question may be raised why *mundum* language is so melodious and why it uses a certain melody. There are reasons behind it. The nature and structures of the *mundum* language, especially the architecture of binomials, make it rhythmic, melodious and poetic. The music of the *mundum* language is an important issue and a potentially fruitful object of study for ethnomusicologists.

### 1.2.8. Expression of totality

The *mundum* language also expresses a certain totality of culture. It governs people's life and ties everything together. Nobody among the Kiratis can live without the *mundum* and go against it, so it also is a kind of moral control. The *mundum* language governs everything which is found in human life, because it is the language of the ancestors, and it is also the means to communicate with people and address the ancestors. The *mundum* addresses every aspect of human life, and so it expresses a totality. To control this totality means power. It is believed that the *mundum* embodies a special type of power, which is very strong and pervasive in nature.

### 1.2.9. Interesting feature in nouns rather than verbs

In Kirati languages, the verbal system is very complicated. The verbal morphology is a rather complex affair in comparison to other languages. Prefixes and suffixes found in Kirati languages are numerous. Moreover, in the Chintang language, free prefix ordering is a most interesting feature, which is rare among the languages of the world (Bickel et al. 2007).

On the contrary, the *mundum* language is different from the ordinary language in the sense that nouns found in the *mundum* language are more interesting and complex than the verbs. The verbs found in the *mundum* language are simple and frequently verbs are similar to the ordinary language. But, nouns in the *mundum* language are more archaic in nature, which make the *mundum* language more distinct.

Besides the binomials, nouns are interesting also in terms of other aspects. In the nouns, code mixing is an important feature. In the *mundum*/ritual nouns, codes are derived from different sources like the Chintang ordinary language, the Nepali language, and Maithili (in a few cases), etc. Moreover, nouns are interesting typologically. There are Nepali single nouns, Nepali binomials, Chintang ordinary single nouns, Chintang binomials, ritual single names, true ritual binomials, multinomials, etc. In this way, in the *mundum* language, nouns are an interesting and challenging issue.

### 1.2.10. Certain vocatives (opening and closing)

In the *mundum* texts, there is a certain vocative term through which any text is opened or started. In Chintang, though there is no uniformity in opening and closing, the majority of people use similar terms, which can be taken as

the style of the Chintang ritual language and can be taken as a property of the Chintang ritual language. The opening term which is used by the majority of performers is *he! pameswora* or 'Oh, Lord'. Here, the term *he!* is a vocative case which is probably borrowed from the Nepali language, and the other term *pameswora* is also borrowed from the Nepali language, and means 'Lord'. These two terms are used to address the deities or ancestors. Similarly, the closing term is also predictable. The majority of people use terms like *satte khane o baba* 'may there be truth, o Lord!' Here, *satte* is a Nepali word which means 'truth'. Similarly, *khane* consists of two terms *kha* which is a copula and *=ne*, which is an optative clitic. Here, *o* is the vocative case. The last term *baba* is a Nepali word which means 'Lord' (as in senior). In this way, there are predictable terms for opening and closing the ritual texts.

### 1.3. Conclusion

The *mundum* is the oral and ritual tradition of the Kiratis, the indigenous inhabitants of east Nepal, and it has been transmitted since countless generations from their ancestors. It controls the cultural life of the people in its totality. The interesting thing observed here is that the *mundum* has its own separate language which is chanted only by ritual experts. It is a divine language so speaking it requires a special competence. There are many features which make the ritual language distinct from the ordinary language. Among these are the structure of nouns, especially the structure of binomials, chanting style, etc.

In the *mundum*/ritual language, the binomial form of nouns is a very interesting phenomenon. Binomials are a basic unit in the pervasive parallelism of ritual speech. Linguistic parallelism is found on different levels, like phonology, prosody, morphology, syntax and semantics. This parallelism makes the language more melodious and poetic. Moreover, the musical aspect of the *mundum* language is an interesting field for ethnomusicologists which is yet to be studied in detail.

The verbal forms are not of equal significance but they are interesting in their subjunctive use. Normally, the agent is 3sg/d/p (in most cases singular), i.e. the client of the performer, and address the 2 sg/d/p (in most case singular). In the ritual context, a tenseless verb functions as the honorific form. This is what is named 'subjunctive' by Bickel et al. 2007. So, there is no grammaticalized honorific form, as found in other languages, but in the *mundum*/ritual language, the subjunctive is used in a honorific function.

Similarly, the incantation speed is distinct from other Kirati groups. Recitation is slow in many other groups but fast in the Chintang group. It has a certain resemblance to the common style of Sanskrit recitation.

Code mixing with other languages like the ordinary Chintang language and Nepali, Sanskrit, Maithili, etc. is found in the *mundum*/ritual language to a considerable degree. This shows that the originality of the *mundum* language is under threat by more powerful languages. So it is urgent to document this tradition, which may no longer exist in the days to come. Finally, this secret language reinforces a particular identity, that of the Kiratis, a significant group in Nepal and is a pointer to how language underpins both devotion and citizenship.

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> These codes refer to sessions from our corpus. All data is available at [www.mpi.nl/dobes](http://www.mpi.nl/dobes)