

INDIGENOUS HEALING THROUGH A 'FOREIGN' MOUTH: A CASE STUDY OF A NYISHI PRIEST'S LIFE AND PRACTICE, ARUNACHAL PRADESH, INDIA

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The art of curing ailments and diseases through indigenous methods is a very old tradition in human history. Among the early societies, diseases were linked to 'possession by evil spirits' and spells and drugs were accordingly formulated. In this regard Gordon Childe writes:

The craft-lore of the medicine-man, like that of the magician, had been committed to writing even in the Bronze Age and continued to be transmitted in the Iron Age...In Greece... there were healing gods...who wrought miraculous cures in their temples. But outside the temple there grew up a school of private physicians who discarded the magical paraphernalia of the medicine, but not his drugs, and relied on manipulative and chemical remedies.¹

The indigenous healing systems followed by various communities of Arunachal Pradesh were attached to religious beliefs and practice. Because of this, the indigenous healing system was synonymous with the traditional priest, the shaman. The term "shaman" is variously used along with native healer, medicine man or medicine woman depending on the cultural perspective of the writer. A performing Native American shaman and writer prefers the term "Native healer" since it represents the cultural perspective of the tradition the shaman is part of.² Mircea Eliade, the noted Romanian historian of religion defined Shamanism as "an ancient technique of ecstasy, often considered a kind of mysticism or magic but in very broad terms also a religion; for him the essence of shamanism was ecstasy."³ Writing about the Shamanism among the Tungus of eastern Siberia, Shirokogoroff described a shaman as "persons of both sexes who have mastered spirits, who at their will can introduce these spirits into themselves and use their power over the spirits in their own interests, particularly helping other people,

¹ Childe, Gordon, *What Happened in History*, Penguin Books, Middlesex, USA, reprint 1957, p.221.

² Medicine Grizzlybear Lake, *Native Healer: Initiation into an Ancient Art*, Wheaton, Illinois, Reprint 2007, *Preface*, p. xv.

³ Quoted in Kho Nishimura, 'Shamanism and Medical Cures', *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 28, No. 4, Aug-Oct., 1987, p. S59 Retrieved from: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2743439> on 21-02-2015 04:11pm.

who suffer from the spirits.”⁴ These various definitions were broadly summarized as: “shamanism is a form of religion which centers on a magico-religious specialist who has a special ability to enter into a trancelike state at will and in the abnormal psychological state can make direct contact with the supernatural being.”⁵ Thus, a shaman was the link between the material and the spiritual world of the people. It is argued by Eliade that “...because the properties and conditions of the soul are within his domain of knowledge, the shaman is a curer and healer of disease.”⁶ These definitions of shaman and shamanism can be inferred to describe the traditional priests of various communities of Arunachal Pradesh. Thus, the traditional priests (healers) were the bedrock of indigenous healing system. Forster and Anderson defined ethno-medicine as: “Comprising those beliefs and practices relating to disease which are the products of indigenous cultural development and are not explicitly derived from the conceptual framework of modern medicine.”⁷ The ethno-medical practice of the people of Arunachal Pradesh is also rooted in religious beliefs and shaped by their environment and customs.

THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL PRIESTS (HEALERS): AN ETHNOGRAPHIC PROFILE

Among the people of Arunachal Pradesh the concept of illness was basically rooted in supernatural cosmology.⁸ The concept of disease or ailments of any sort occurring as a result of breach of the balance with natural and supernatural forces among the animistic communities of Arunachal Pradesh thus made the traditional priest (healer) the curer and healer of disease. The priest was the sole negotiator to safely retrieve the diseased soul of a person from the offended spirits and gods. The traditional priests are known by various names across the communities of the state depending on linguistic variation. They however perform similar functions and fulfil same objectives. Among the central tribes of the state the traditional priests known as *Nyubhu* among the Nyishi, *Nyibu* among the Apatani, Tagin and Galo and *Miri* among the Adi. They are informally divided into various categories in terms of their competence with the more proficient ones capable of going into trance and “speak to the spirits”. They were the sole negotiator to deal with the spirit world and were the sole agency of performance of religion in this sense. Since all individual and communal adversities and as well as good fortunes were traced to an offended spirit or deity, the latter must be reimbursed with necessary rituals and sacrifice. Ailments of any

⁴ S.M. Shirokogoroff, *Psychomental Complex of the Tungus*, 1935, as cited in *ibid*.

⁵ Kokan Sasaki, ‘*Shamanizumu no jinruigaku* (The Anthropology of Shamanism)’, 1984 as cited in *ibid*.

⁶ Mercea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, 1964 as cited in Rex L. Jones, ‘Shamanism in South Asia: A Preliminary Survey’, *History of Religions*, Vol. 7, No. 4, May 1968, pp. 330-331 Retrieved from: <http://jstor.org/stable/1061796> on 23-09-2010 03:28 pm.

⁷ M. Forster and B.G. Anderson, *Medical Anthropology*, 1978 as quoted in James Anquandah, ‘African Ethnomedicine: An Anthropological and ethno-archaeological Case study in Ghana’, *Africa: Rivista trimestrale di studi e documentazione dell’istituto italiano per l’Africa e l’oriente*, Anno 52, No.2, Guino 1997, p.289 Retrieved from: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40761171> on 14-12-2015 04: 25 pm.

⁸ Verrier Elwin, *Myths of the North-East Frontier of India*, Munshiram Manoharlal, first published 1958, New Delhi, Reprint 1999, p.256.

sort formed an important part of this human-shaman-spirit complex. Rituals varied in nature depending on the type it was meant for. But each started after auguries had been taken priorly, usually by checking conjured parts of egg, chicks'-liver etc.

Earlier ethnographical studies on healing rites and rituals in Arunachal Pradesh were largely interwoven within study of religion and culture. As a result, the conceptual and methodical framework for study of indigenous traditional healing practices of the state did not get much attention from earlier researchers and ethnographers except a few works done on ethno-botanical studies hitherto. For example, Dunbar, Stonor and Haimendorf studied the ritual types, symbolism of both the priests' dress and the ritual structure etc. In the scheme of indigenous belief system the supreme creator was presumed to have adopted a policy of non-interference in the daily affairs of the human beings and therefore, rituals involving diseases were not performed in the name of the absolute power. Ethno-etiology was rooted in the balance or imbalance of the human-spirit relationship and the ability of the shaman to restore it to a favourable position.

Traditional priests are reported as the healer of ailments and diseases in the early societies of Arunachal Pradesh which prevailed till 20th century. These healing and curing of various ailments in the interior areas by the local priests strengthened the popular existence of ethno-medical health care system as well as their function. Amongst the communities of the state who did not follow Buddhism,⁹ the healing system was similar as described above. Similar Aka (*Hrusso*) religion and propitiatory rituals were reported in 1868 by Hesselmeier.¹⁰ The same system of religious belief and healing in contemporary Aka life is supported by recent researches.¹¹ The religious rites of the Nyishi who live further north and east to the Aka (*Hrusso*) was noted around the same time and it was emphasized that the sole remedy of disease was propitiation of deities. Diseases were supposed to arise entirely from preternatural agency which can only be cured through the service of the traditional priest through performance of rituals.¹² Among the Nyishi cases of cholera and small-pox were isolated in the jungle.¹³ A more detail study of the Nyishi religion, rituals and shaman was done in 1957 under which the centrality of the traditional priest in healing continued to be emphasized.¹⁴ The Sulung (*Puroik*) who live in the midst of the

⁹ For a brief review of Buddhist healing practices, especially among the Monpas, see Tajen Dabi, "Re-assessing Pre-Colonial Ethnomedicine: Monpa Chiropractic Tradition" in Sudhir Kumar Singh and Ashan Riddi, Eds., *Pre-Colonial History and Traditions of Arunachal Pradesh*, DVS Publishers, Guwahati, 2017, pp.122- 133.

¹⁰ C.H. Hesselmeier, 'A Missionary's view of the Akas' in Verrier Elwin (ed.), *India's North East Frontier in the Nineteenth Century*, Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1959, p. 441.

¹¹ Raghuvir Sinha, *The Akas*, Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, 1961, rep 1988, Itanagar, pp.111-136 and; Gibji Nimachow, 'Sacred Places, Beliefs, festivals and Rituals of the Aka of Palizi village' in Tamo Mibang and M.C. Behera (ed.), *Dynamics of Tribal Villages in Arunachal Pradesh: Emerging Realities*, Mittal Publications, 2004, pp.219-225.

¹² F/No. 420 of 1851, *Government of Bengal Papers*, 'Mr Robinson's Note on the Daflas (Nyishi) and Peculiarities of their Language'.

¹³ G.W. Dun, 'Notes on the Daflas' in Verrier Elwin (ed.), *op.cit.*, p.187.

¹⁴ C.R. Stonor, 'Notes on the Religion and Rituals of the Dafla Tribes of the Assam Himalayas', *op.cit.*, pp.1-23.

Nyishi have similar religion, rituals and priests.¹⁵ Haimendorf who studied the Nyishi and Apatani observed that the religion and ritual practice of the Apatani falls in the same pattern as that of the Nyishi and the Adi.¹⁶ The Tagin who live to the north of the Nyishi and Apatani in Subansiri follow similar ritual practice and healing through the institution of traditional priest.¹⁷ The prominence of the traditional priest in religious life of the people and the centrality of rituals in mitigating diseases are no different in the case of the Galo and the Adi living to the east and south-east of the Tagin. Ethnographic works by many anthropologists confirms the similarity of cultural life and indigenous healing systems with their neighbours.¹⁸ French missionary Father Krick who visited Mebo in the Adi area in 1853 and Dalton made same observations which were later on expanded by Haimendorf.¹⁹ In 1825-28 Mishmis living further east of the Adi were reported with similar religious belief and propitiation to various sylvan deities for cure of any illness or mis-fortune. The taboo observed after rituals were also noted. On such occasions a sprig of a plant was placed at the door to inform strangers that the house is under a ban for the time and that it must not be entered.²⁰ This was the ritual taboo prescribed by the presiding priest and observed after performance of any ritual, the degree and nature of isolation or seclusion depending on the type of ritual performed. This feature is considerably common amongst all the tribes of the state among who the treatment of diseases are the sole domain of religio-magic knowledge of a priest. Similar propitiatory rituals of the Mishmi as mentioned by Wilcox and Needham²¹ have been elaborated in more detail by recent researches.²² In 1873, it was reported that the Khampti as followers of the Myanmarese Buddhism and practiced polytheistic cults and no trace

¹⁵ R.K. Deuri, *The Sulungs*, Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, Itanagar, 1982, pp.78-89.

¹⁶ Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, *The Apatanis and their Neighbours: A Primitive Civilization of the Eastern Himalayas*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, New York, 1962, pp.131-152; Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, *The Apatanis and their Neighbours: A Primitive Civilization of the Eastern Himalayas*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, New York, 1962, pp.131-152; Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, *A Himalayan Tribe: from Cattle to Cash*, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1980, pp.168-173; and Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, *Highlanders of Arunachal Pradesh: Anthropological Research in North East India*, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1982, pp.128—144.

¹⁷ S.M. Krishnatry, *Border Tagins of Arunachal Pradesh*, National Book Trust, New Delhi, 2005, first published 1997, pp.213-219 and Ashan Riddi, *The Tagins of Arunachal Pradesh: A Study of Continuity and Change*, Abhijeet Publication, Delhi, 2006, p. 29; pp. 197-210.

¹⁸ Bikash Bannerjee, *The Bokars: An Anthropological research on their ecological settings and Social Systems*, Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, Itanagar, 1999, pp.153-170; L.R.N. Srivastav, *The Gallongs*, Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, Itanagar, 1988, pp. 100-112; and Tai Nyori, *History and Culture of the Adis*, Omsons Publications, New Delhi, 1993 and George D-S- Dunbar, 'Abors and Gallongs: Notes on certain Hill Tribes of the Indo-Tibetan Border', *Memiors of Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol. 5 (1913-1917), Extra No. pp.67-77.

¹⁹ Father N.M. Krick, 'Account of an Expedition among the Abors in 1853', in Verrier Elwin (Ed), *op.cit.*, pp. 236-48; E.T. Dalton, 'Capt Dalton's visit to Membu', *ibid.*, p.267 and Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, 'Religious Beliefs and Rituals of the Minyong Abors of Assam, India', *op.cit.*, p.604.

²⁰ R. Wilcox, 'Rude Friends', in Verrier Elwin (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 306.

²¹ J.F. Needham, 'Bebejiya Manners and Customs', *ibid.*, p.350.

²² J.P. Mills, 'The Mishmis of the Lohit Valley, Assam', *The Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 82, No. 1, Jan.-Jun., 1952, pp. 1-12 Retrieved from: <http://jstor.org/stable/28440366> on 01/05/2012 04:48 pm; Tapan Kumar M. Baruah, *The Idu Mishmis*, Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, Itanagar, 1960, rep 1988, pp.69-93; Tarun Kumar Bhattacharjee, *The Idus of Dree and Mathun Valley*, Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, Itanagar, 1983, pp.117-142; Rajiv Miso, *Priesthood among the Idu-Mishmis*, M.Phil. Dissertation (unpublished) submitted to the Arunachal Institute of Tribal Studies (AITS), RGU, 2005 and Tarun Mene, *Suicide among the Idu Mishmi Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh*, PhD Thesis (unpublished) submitted to the Arunachal Institute of Tribal Studies (AITS), RGU, 2011.

of monotheism²³ amongst the Khampti. Similar development among the Singphos were also reported. In 1828 Neufville noted strange mixture of idolatry and superstition among the Singpho.²⁴ He also mentioned *Megh deota* which shows some influence of religious idea from the neighbouring people of plains. Similarly, Macgregor and Gray also described the Singpho propitiatory rituals practiced during those days.²⁵ The Tangsa and Wancho who live in the eastern part of the state also practiced the indigenous institution of religion and rituals²⁶ system in their homestead. The propitiatory rituals are connected to agriculture, festivals, diseases and welfare of human being. Generally ritual is performed in order to propitiate the deities and in return such blessings for bumper harvesting, ward off from natural calamities and rich animal husbandry. Other than the common welfare ritual the priest also performed a sacrifice ritual for healing the ailment of patient in the society. Thus because of this centrality of ritual healing system being practiced by the people the indigenous priests occupied a prominent place in the society and play a vital sacerdotal role.

Late Shri Tadar Nyajung²⁷ was a renowned priest in the entire Papum Pare District and in the lower Nyishi belt. Son of late Shri Tadar Langlum of Gangte Village under Sagalee Sub-Division of the undivided Subansiri District, Nyajung later on shifted and settled in Doimukh town located near the state capital Itanagar. Like Tama Mindo, he was also “lifted” by the *Yapoms* during his childhood and kept in “confinement” for about a month in the jungle. Dreams and such other signs generally associated with would-be priests (*Nyub*) kept occurring at regular intervals till finally Nyajung became a full-time priest. He along with his priest-friend Chuku Topu acquired name and fame for their priestly powers and ritualistic healing capacity. They were *Nyigre Nyubs* (priests of high order who could willingly transform themselves into animals). They could individually or jointly perform *Nyigre* and successfully take down pre-identified mithuns (*bos frontalis*), produce things kept hidden in a challenger’s granary through a quick incantation of magical words etc. in order to prove their priestly power to the common folks.

In 1969-70, late Nyajung’s wife converted to Christianity but he continued to practice his priestly duties. After two decades, in 1989-90 he also joined the church and remained so till his death. What is astonishing is that even after his conversion to Christianity, Nyajung’s role, name and fame as a priest and as a healer was not affected. He continued to perform rituals using indigenous hymns, narrate the myth-origin of man and universe,

²³ T.T. Cooper, ‘Khampti Religion’, Verrier Elwin (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 372.

²⁴ J.B. Neufville, ‘Singpho Religion’, *ibid.*, p. 398.

²⁵ C.R. Macgregor, ‘Singpho Rites and Ceremonies’, *ibid.*, p.415 and J. Errol Gray, ‘A Tour in the Singpho Country’, *ibid.*, p. 422.

²⁶ Parul Dutta, *The Tangsas*, Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, Itanagar, 1959, rep 2010, p.62; and L.R.N. Srivastav, *Among the Wanchos*, Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, Itanagar, 1970, rep 2010, pp.79-97.

²⁷ Information about Late Sh. Tadar Nyajung (who died some couple of years back) was gathered through personal interview with the priest’s son Mr. Tadar Nipo at the latter’s residence at Doimukh, Papum Pare district, Arunachal Pradesh on January 7, 2017.

trace family lineage, invoke the migratory routes etc. in his ritual chants as priests usually do. The only symbol of his conversion to Christian faith was that he would conclude the rituals in the name of Jesus Christ. Everything else in the rituals he performed was same as in the indigenous system. In other words, Tadar Nyojung was an indigenous priest who converted to Christianity but continued to perform rituals and heal people through indigenous healing methods. His conversion did not affect his priestly powers of healing. He was much sought after for chiropractic cases (bone-fracture) as well as important personal and family rituals related to diseases and general wellness. Common people and VIPs, illiterate and educated, Christians and followers of indigenous faith, patients and doctors, and tribals and non-tribals alike approached him to seek redress for what could not be cured though medical intervention. Nyojung continued his services this way and died as a Christian.

The life and practice of the priest Nyojung reflects two things: first, the continued relevance of ritual-healing through the priests' incantations and rituals; and second, the interesting fact that adoption of a new religion (Christianity) does not necessarily mean discarding the indigenous one. Though not commonly seen, Late Nyojung's case reflects the richness and well as catholic nature of both the indigenous priestly-tradition and the Christian church as well. This assumes importance in the backdrop of the ongoing Donyi-Polo indigenous faith movement in the state which is trying to restore and rehabilitate the fast eroding traditional values, indigenous religion and systems of healing. A recent study calls this movement "reformist" in the "contested domains of religious transformation..."²⁸ The *Nyubh* (priest) stands as the pillar of indigenous healing system among the Nyishi. The afore-mentioned Donyi-Polo indigenous faith movement is being carried out among the Nyishi also through *Nyedar Namlo* (prayer house).

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²⁸ Sarit Kumar Chaudhari, 'The Institutionalization of Tribal Religion: Recasting the Donyi-Polo Movement in Arunachal Pradesh,' *Asian Ethnology*, Volume 72, Number 2, 2013, pp. 259-277.