

# Traditional Healing Practices Among the Monpa Tribe of Tawang District of Arunachal Pradesh

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## Abstract

The Monpa tribe of Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh, maintains a distinctive healing system that embodies the synthesis of indigenous ethno medical knowledge, Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, and the ecological wisdom of the Eastern Himalayas. Monpa Communities Practice different types of traditional healing practices rooted in oral traditions, their practices include a holistic approach wherein illness is perceived not only as a physical ailment but also as a disruption in spiritual and social harmony. Traditional healers play an important role in preparing herbal remedies from the regions diverse flora, while also conducting rituals, mantras, and offerings to restore balance between the individual, community and the spiritual world. The primary objective of this paper is to document and analyze the monpa healing practices with specific attention to their ethno botanical and ritual practices. The study adopts an ethnographic methodology, incorporating participant observation, semi structured interviews with healers and community elders. The findings highlight the resilience of monpa healing in sustaining cultural identity and ecological knowledge. By situating monpa healing within the wider discourses on indigenous medicine and cultural preservation, the study contributes to ongoing debates on sustainable healthcare and the role of traditional knowledge in contemporary societies.

**Keywords:** Monpa tribe, traditional healing, ethnomedicine, indigeneous knowledge, cultural preservation.

## INTRODUCTION

The monpa tribe, inhabiting the Tawang district of Arunachal Pradesh, is known for its rich cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge systems. Among the most significant aspects of their cultural identity is their practice of traditional healing, which continues to play a vital role in the socio- cultural and spiritual life of the community. For generations, the monpas have relied on a variety of healing specialists who are widely respected and recognized within the society for their ability to diagnose illness, restore balance, and promote physical, mental, and spiritual well-being.

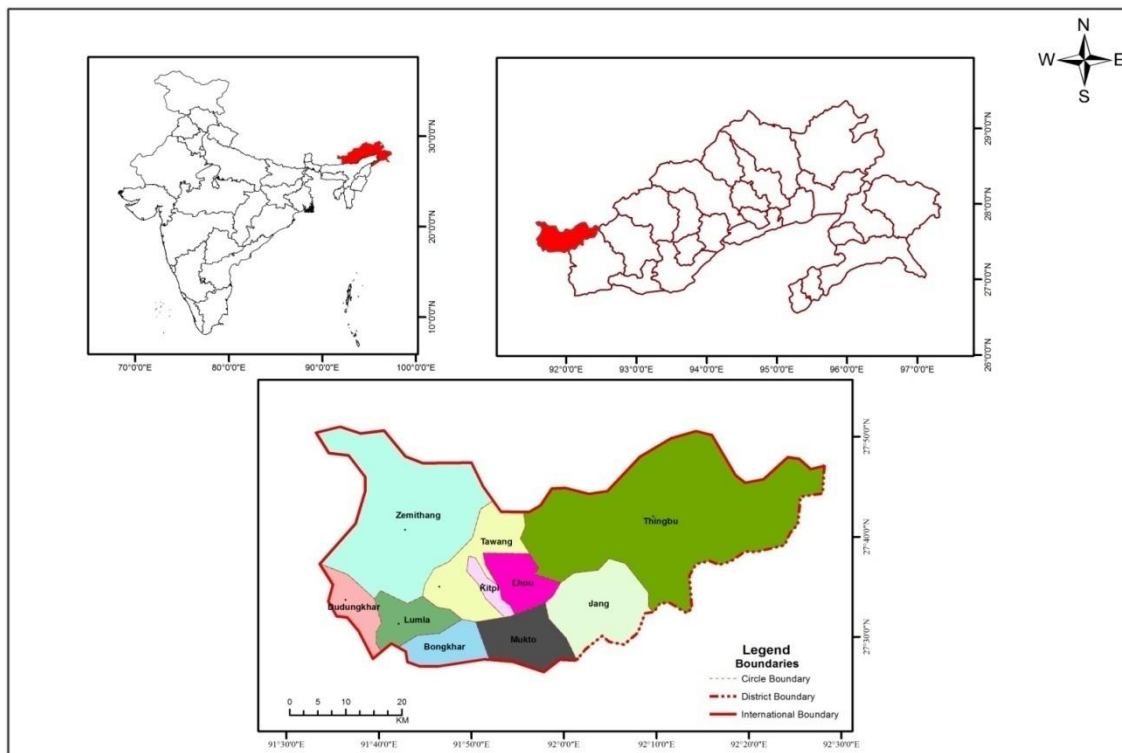
Traditional healing among the monpas can be understood as a system of healthcare practiced by recognized healers within the community, who employs various methods to promote physical, mental and spiritual well-being. These practices are based on the community's social, cultural, and religious beliefs as well as on accumulated knowledge passed down through generations. The techniques used by traditional healers are diverse and vary according to the type of ailment and its perceived cause. They may include herbal medicines, ritualistic practices and spiritual techniques to treat different kinds of illness.

Despite the growing influence of modern healthcare systems in the region, traditional healing continues to remain relevant, especially in rural areas. Many community members still seek traditional healers either as a first line of treatment or alongside biomedical care, demonstrating the continued trust and cultural significance of indigenous medical knowledge. The persistence of these practices highlights the importance of documenting, preserving and understanding traditional healing as part of the broader cultural identity of the monpa tribe.

### STUDY AREA

Tawang is a thinly populated Mountainous tract lying roughly between the latitudes 27°25'N and 27°55' N and longitudes 91°35'E and 92°20' E on the North West extreme of Arunachal Pradesh. The district is surrounded by Tibet (China) in the North East, Bhutan in the South East and West Kameng and East Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh in the South West. The District is also known as the 'The Hidden Paradise'. The district occupies an area of 2172sq.km. which is 2.59 % geographical area of the state. The research was conducted in the Tawang district, covering villages such as Lhou, Jang, Jangda, Seru, Zamkhar, Zemithang and surrounding regions where traditional healing remains actively participated.

LOCATION MAP OF STUDY AREA



Source: Extracted from DEM using arcGIS 10.3

### OBJECTIVES

- To document the traditional healing practices among the Monpa tribe of Tawang district.
- To identify the different types of traditional healers and their methods of treatment.
- To examine the socio-cultural and spiritual significance of indigenous healing practices.
- To assess the relevance of traditional healing in the context of modern healthcare systems.

## METHODOLOGY

The study is purely focused on primary database. For collection of primary data –

- (a) Participant observation of rituals, herbal preparations, and healing sessions.
- (b) Interviews and discussion with traditional healers.
- (c) Surveys for medicinal plant documentation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### TYPES OF TRADITIONAL HEALERS-

#### (1) BONE SETTER (ROIIPA CHOIGAN)

Among the monpa tribe, Local bone setters, referred as Roipa Choigan, possess specialized knowledge and skills in treating bone fractures, dislocations and other muscular related injuries. These practitioners use indigenous techniques that involve manual manipulation, herbal applications and locally prepared splints and ointments such as ngamar (sacred bam) and ngachu (sacred water) which is considered essential in reducing pain and promoting early recovery. Their methods are based on experimental learning and knowledge transmitted orally through generations, reflecting the community's deep understanding of human anatomy and natural healing processes. Their expertise includes the diagnosis and treatment of fractures, dislocations and other related injuries using non-invasive, experience based techniques. Diagnosis is carried out through careful palpation, observation of swelling, mobility and the patient's pain response. In many villages, traditional bone setters are the primary healthcare providers for bone related injuries. The bone setting process often associated with ritualistic and spiritual elements. Healing session generally begins with prayers, chanting of mantras, or offerings to local deities, seeking spiritual protection and blessings for the recovery of the patient. This reflects the holistic worldview in which physical, spiritual and environmental well-being is interconnected.

Despite the increasing accessibility of modern healthcare facilities, monpa communities-especially in remote villages-continue to rely on traditional bone setters due to their immediate availability, cultural familiarity and perceived effectiveness. Many individuals prefer these healers for minor fractures and sprains, seeking biomedical treatments only when conditions become severe. As such, bone setting remains an important expression of indigenous knowledge and cultural resilience within the broader landscape of monpa traditional healing practices.

#### (2) POISON REMOVER (DOH SHONGAN)

Beliefs and perception of poisoning:- Within the traditional belief system of the monpa tribe, poisoning is not always viewed as a natural occurrence, rather it is often associated with intentional or supernatural acts. The monpas believed that certain individuals possess the power to inflict harm through poison-such person are locally referred to as 'Dohma'-a term in monpa dialect where doh signifies poison and ma denotes one who possess poison and the phrase collectively denotes one who possess poison.

It is believed that Dohmas have the ability to administer poison not only through physical means such as foods, fruits or drinks, but also through more subtle and mystical channels such as the gaze (meyh-doh) and touch. Illness caused by such acts often interpreted as a manifestation of jealousy and revenge.

The concept of poisoning reflects a deep interconnection between health, morality and spirituality in monpa culture.

**Role of Traditional Healers:-** The treatment and removal of poison are carried out by traditional healers known as Doh-Shongan (Doh meaning poison and Shongan- a person who removes poison), who are respected figures within the society. The healers diagnosed a case of suspected poisoning through moh-divination. Upon diagnosing a case of poisoning, the healers perform a series of rituals like chanting of mantras, burning of incense to invoke protective deities and drive away the harmful essence.

**Method and Ritual Procedures:-** The poison removal process is both diagnostic and therapeutic. The healer identifies the source through ritual divination, observation and intuition. Specific steps may include- burning of incense, chanting of prayers to purify the environment, invocation of deities through prayers and offerings. In addition to ritualistic remedies, some healers employ physical techniques believed to draw out the poison from patients body. A commonly observed method involves –

(a) The application of oil mixed with fur or feather of a bird near the naval areas. It is believed that the oil and the organic texture of the fur are thought to attract and neutralize the toxic substances within the body.

(b) In certain cases, healers also perform suction therapy, where the healer sucks the affected part of the body to draw out the poison.

These practices are usually accompanied by ritual chanting and prayers.

### **(3) SPIRIT SUMMONING (PLAH THUGOH)**

Spirit summoning is an important part of their traditional healing practices and reflects their deep rooted belief in the spiritual world. The monpas believe that health and illness are not only physical conditions but are deeply connected to the balance between the human body, spirit and surrounding supernatural forces. The purpose of summoning is to retrieve the lost soul and to protect the patient from the future harm. It can be performed by any individual who are familiar with the rituals. The ritual involves several symbolic steps- chanting of mantras and prayers, offering of grains, popcorn, butter lamp and incense to please the spirit. The healers used several sacred items like-

Breh (Traditional bowl), kay (walnut), ngyondhup (bangles), yeng bai (sheep wool), monshug (handmade paper), fan (flag), etc as a part of healing rituals.

### **(4) RELOCATION OF ABDOMEN MUSCLE (KYAIPA SHAGU)**

Monpas believe among young children a recurrent uneasiness is often observed which is known as kyaipa bapu (dislocation of abdomen muscles). The symptoms include- discomfort in the stomach, vomiting, dysentery, and drowsiness. The discomfort typically occurs out of sudden movements, for example- jumping in high intensity from one place to another among the toddlers and among infants it is caused by parents handling of the baby, for example it can happen if one threw the baby in the air and carry the baby in speed rocking motion. Many women in the villages diagnose and treat the uneasiness with traditional methods of relocating the abdomen muscle with the use of a brass oval instrument known as melong (mirror). The lady first inspects the child's symptoms and conditions. If the child is showing all the mentioned symptoms and additionally if his/her eyelashes have dropped and is breathing heavily, they are diagnosed with the uneasiness then the treatment procedure begins immediately, the child is first laid on his back and then abdomen area is uncovered, sprinkled with drops of cold water. The child is supposed to be startled by this, which again helps him in his speedy recovery. Then, the lady collects the water sprinkled on his belly by the melong, by rubbing it to the direction of umbilicus, so to correct all the muscles. The oval brass tool's attachment with the belly where it comes in connection with the belly

dictates the severity of the uneasiness. Once the water is collected in centre, a layer of old wool is placed on the navel and tightly binds by a piece of cloth. The child is then lifted upside down by his legs and shakes twice or thrice for the muscles to go upwards and he is laid on his back for another minute or two. The procedure of the treatment is repeated twice a day and depending on the severity of the child's uneasiness, when the child slowly recovers, the melong no longer sticks to the belly with water when came in contact and that is how the healer pronounce the child's full recovery from the uneasiness. The traditional healing method only requires a melong and skilled and experienced women, usually a mother. Unlike other monpa traditional healing method, it does not use chanting of mantras and any sort of divine intervention. Infact, many mothers in most household perform the method as it is believed that the healing method of kyaipa shagu when perform by the own mother of the child is the most effective. The immediate relief by the method makes the practice most popular among the mothers. Amalgamation of physical therapy, love and care by the mother, results in positive and immediate recovery of the child from kyaipa bapu.

#### **(5) INITIAL HOME REMEDIES (THAP-THAP YAGU)**

The ancient belief of monpas that once it gets dark the harmful spirits comes out to pollute and make the environment unhappy when spiritually weaker people go out from home during these crucial hours, they are encountered with these spirits , who then bring discomfort to their bodily atmosphere. Thus a quick remedial healing practice is performed at home by any member of the household. The method includes-burning of specific type of incense locally known as dutpa and shin rhung( protective holy amulet). The uneasiness is also treated by rubbing a sacred balm (ngahmar). Once the traditional practice of thap thap is performed the ill person is supposed to vomit, which signs his early relief and thus instant full recovery from the uneasiness. When the uneasiness is more severe, a local lama is also called and chanting of mantras and making of torma (sacrificial flour animal), zanchampong (hand prints made with dough) is also included and a mixed grain is to be thrown together. The uneasiness of any nature and intensity is thus brought to central at home and ill ones are provided with great relief immediately.

#### **(6) JIVIE DONCHENCHENGA/ BUTSA KURM ( A RITUAL WORSHIP PERFORMED BY CHILDREN)**

Within the traditional healing system of the monpa community Butsa Kurm represents a distinctive form of ritual conducted by children. The term butsa refers to children while kurm denotes the workshop performed by them. The healing practice known as butsa kurm is performed particularly when an individual becomes severely ill and immediate relief is required. The ritual is conducted by young children, usually between six to ten years of age in groups of more than five children. As a part of the ceremony the children prepares Kamtsa Torma (sacrificial dough made of clay) which they subsequently throw in four different directions (north, south, east and west) to symbolically disperse negative or harmful forces. It is considered inauspicious if the children encounter anyone on their way to dispose of the torma. During the ritual, the children recite unique mantras which are believed to carry healing potency and are often unintelligible to adults. A small drum is also used to accompany their chanting. At the conclusion of the ritual, the children receive monetary offerings as a gesture of appreciation for their involvement.



**PLATE I: BONE SETTER (ROI PA CHOIGAN)**



**PLATE II: PLAH THUGOH (SPIRIT SUMMONING)**



**PLATE III: KYAIPA SHAGU (RELOCATION OF ABDOMEN MUSCLE)**

## CONCLUSION

The traditional healing practices of the Monpa community reflect a deep connection between their culture, spirituality and natural environment. Religious belief of the people plays an important role in guiding healing rituals. Despite the growing influence of modern medicine, these traditional healing methods continue to hold a strong cultural and spiritual significance in the community. Preserving and documenting them not only safeguards indigenous knowledge but also encourages the integration of traditional knowledge and modern healthcare system for an inclusive wellbeing.

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