

Reclaiming Indigenous Wisdom through the Traditional Healing Practices of the Monpa tribe of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

Indigenous healing practices play a significant role in providing healthcare among indigenous communities, particularly in remote regions of Arunachal Pradesh in India, where access to modern medical facilities is limited. They refer to the practice of using natural remedies, rituals, and techniques passed down through generations within a particular culture or community to promote health, well-being, and healing. Traditional healing practices among the Monpa tribe of Arunachal Pradesh encompass a rich spiritual, ritual, and herbal methods deeply rooted in their cultural heritage. This tribe has a rich cultural legacy that includes traditional healing practices that promote peace with the environment and nature as well as a holistic approach to health and well-being. Ayurvedic ideas, which combine traditional Indian knowledge with indigenous wisdom, are incorporated by the Monpa community as well. With its emphasis on overall well-being and use of natural medicines, Ayurveda enhances the Monpa community's traditional therapeutic practices. Though the Monpa tribe relies heavily on traditional healing methods for addressing a wide range of ailments, scarce studies have been done so far in documenting these practices and their cultural significance. Therefore, this paper aims to provide a detailed overview of indigenous healing practices within the Monpa community, focusing on their historical roots, diversity, ethnomedicine, and role in healthcare delivery by drawing on ethnographic data and existing literature. Also, since Indian Knowledge System (IKS) of NEP 2020 was proposed to protect and promote the country's rich cultural legacy, the objective of the paper is to document and understand the cultural significance of traditional healing practices to assess the compatibility of Monpa communities traditional knowledge system with that of Indian knowledge system by analyzing the potential integration of Monpa's Indigenous knowledge into mainstream education in accordance with NEP 2020 guidelines. This qualitative ethnographic study will provide the diverse healing modalities utilized by the Monpa community by shedding light on the spiritual practices such as Mo and Lha-Jyugshi, ritual healing ceremonies like Chhoga and Shirnying Duidog. It will also explain how traditional medicines are sourced from the region's rich biodiversity. This paper will elucidate the historical roots, practical applications, and cultural significance of indigenous healing practices within the Monpa society by direct observation, participant responses, and interviews with key informants. It will also highlight the challenges faced by these traditional healing methods, including the lack of comprehensive documentation and threats to biodiversity.

Keywords: Arunachal Pradesh, ethnomedicine, indigenous wisdom, Monpa tribe, traditional healing practices, sustainability of culture

Introduction

Traditional healing refers to the practice of using natural remedies, rituals, and techniques passed down through generations within a particular culture or community to promote health, well-being, and healing. According to Janes (2019), traditional healing often prioritizes the interconnectedness of mind, body, and spirit, emphasizing the importance of addressing underlying spiritual or emotional imbalances alongside physical symptoms. As noted by Wreford and Deacon (2019), these practices encompass a wide array of modalities, including herbal remedies, ritualistic ceremonies, and spiritual healing techniques. Despite the increasing dominance of Western biomedicine, traditional healing continues to endure, reflecting its enduring relevance and efficacy within many communities (Kirmayer, 2019).

Indigenous healing practices play a significant role in providing healthcare among indigenous communities, particularly in remote regions such as Arunachal Pradesh in Northeastern India, where access to modern medical facilities is limited. The Monpa tribe, one of the major ethnic groups in the region, relies heavily on traditional healing methods for addressing a wide range of ailments. However, despite their prevalence and importance, there is a lack of comprehensive studies documenting these practices and their cultural significance. This paper aims to provide a detailed overview of indigenous healing practices within the Monpa community, focusing on their historical roots, diversity, and role in healthcare delivery. Drawing on ethnographic data and existing literature.

This paper shed light on the various sub-tribes within the Monpa community and their distinct healing traditions, including the roles of Bonpus, Getuks, and Monks_in preserving and transmitting healing knowledge. The paper examines the belief systems underpinning indigenous healing, including the spiritual connections with deities known as 'Phu' and the distinction between personal and public beliefs. Furthermore, the paper discusses the practical applications of indigenous healing, particularly in addressing physical injuries, flu, migraines, and other common ailments, through the expertise of traditional bone setters, naturopaths, and chiropractors. It also discusses the contextual factors contributing to the prevalence of indigenous healing practices in the region, such as the remote topography and limited access to modern healthcare facilities. Thus, this paper aims to contribute to the preservation of traditional knowledge and inform efforts to integrate indigenous healthcare into broader healthcare system.

Literature Review

Chakraborty et al. (2017) conducted the first report on the ethnopharmacological use of medicines among the Monpa tribe in the Zemithang region of Arunachal Pradesh. They observed that certain plant species and their specific parts were utilized as drugs by incorporating them in precise proportions.

Namsa et al. (2011) highlighted the profound knowledge of forest-based natural resources among rural populations in Arunachal Pradesh. They noted that the consumption of wild edible plants remains an integral aspect of the socio-cultural life of these communities.

Singh et al. (2005) revealed the significant awareness among local farmers, particularly the Monpa tribe, regarding the importance of biodiversity and natural resource management. The Monpa tribe has developed indigenous strategies tailored to their specific location for sustainable biodiversity conservation and overall natural resource management at the community level.

Paul and Khan (2010) found that rhododendrons hold crucial importance for the local people, serving

various purposes including aesthetic and sacred value.

Wangpan T et al. (2022) demonstrated the Monpa people's adeptness in utilizing plant-based therapy for treating a variety of ailments. However, they also highlighted the potential threats to these plants, such as habitat fragmentation, cultural shifts, and the growing preference for modern allopathic medicines.

Tajen, D. (2017) discussed the traditional role of priests as mediators between the community and the spiritual realm. Across various linguistic variations, these priests are known by different names and are entrusted with the task of safely retrieving the diseased soul of individuals from offended spirits and gods.

Objectives

1. To comprehensively document and understand the indigenous healing practices within the Monpa community of Arunachal Pradesh, Northeastern India.
2. To explore the cultural significance of traditional healing methods among the Monpa tribe and their role in healthcare delivery.
3. To identify challenges faced by indigenous healing practices, such as the lack of documentation and threats to biodiversity, and proposes strategies for integrating these practices into broader healthcare systems while preserving traditional knowledge.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative ethnographic approach to investigate the indigenous healing practices within the Monpa community of Arunachal Pradesh, Northeastern India. Drawing on existing literature, ethnographic data, and firsthand observations, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of traditional healing methods, their cultural significance, and their role in healthcare delivery among the Monpa tribe. Primary data for this study are gathered through direct observation, participant response, and informal interviews with members of the Monpa community who are knowledgeable about indigenous healing practices. The researcher spends significant time within the community, observing healing rituals, ceremonies, and treatments, and engaging in conversations with traditional healers, community elders, and individuals who have firsthand experience with traditional healing methods. Semi structured interviews are conducted with key informants, including traditional healers, elders, and community leaders, to gather in-depth insights into specific healing techniques, their historical roots, and their practical applications. Secondary data are obtained through a comprehensive review of existing literature, including academic papers, research articles, and ethnographic studies, related to indigenous healing practices among the Monpa tribe and other indigenous communities in similar contexts.

Healing Practices among the Monpa Tribe

1. Spiritual Healing Practices

- a. Mo - It is called divination, a type of prediction used to detect the root cause of sickness spiritually. Oftentimes, when we lose things, it helps us identify where they were lost and predicts their location. It can determine the responsible party, even if it's a human.
- b. Lha – Jyugshi (Nechung oracle) – It is also a form of spiritual healing. In short, only a few individuals are deemed holy enough to participate in this practice. These individuals, known as the chosen ones, inherit this ability from their ancestors. The process begins when the chosen ones is dressed in the uniform of Lha and prayers are chanted by Monks. Lha, the wisdom being, enters the chosen person's

body, revealing insights such as future predictions, reasons for problems, and even the detection of black magic. It is so remarkable that it's said to have the ability to extract pins or coins from a person's stomach, it can stab the sick patient with a sword yet leaving no injury and during an oracle, it can even manifest an evil spirit in the form of a snake.

- c. Zhabthui- Another form of spiritual healing practiced by Monks, this involves pouring water from a vase (known as bompā) onto the sick person's head while chanting prayers to cleanse harmful diseases and illnesses.
- d. Kago - Only a few Monks practice this method, which involves meditation, deity invocation, mantra chanting, and the use of a 'vajra' on the victim's shoulder and head to ward off future possibilities of illness.
- e. Tra- A vase-like container called Bompā contains a silver round mirror known as mhelong. Firstly, it is worshipped to the god, and then predictions are shown in the mirror akin to a movie screening. These predictions reveal where a particular sickness originated, why it occurred, when it started, and how it can be prevented.
- f. Serkhap – A golden needle is utilized to cure Migraine, a golden needle called serkhap is injected on a person's head which cures Migraine in an instant. A practice that is still carried out by local doctors to this day.
- g. Wang – Initiation empowerment in the form of blessings. The Wang ritual occurs in the monastery. During this ceremony, sweets (known as Tseril) and local beers (Tse-chang) are distributed among the attendees. Following this, the Head Lama bestows blessings upon the gathered devotees. He does so by touching their heads. Meanwhile, other monks tie small pieces of fabric (Hrungma), typically half to one inch in width and of various colors, around the neck of the devotees. This act symbolizes blessings for happiness and long life.

2. Ritual Healing

- A. Chhoga: This ritual healing practice involves the use of torrma materials. It encompasses various types, such as melan chhoga and chha sum, aimed at removing noiba or harmful evils.
- B. Shirnying Duidog: This ritual is performed when someone falls ill, with the purpose of dispelling barchey (bad vibes) and shing (ghosts).
- C. Gyab Zhee: This practice is undertaken to eliminate nyoba, which signifies harmful evils.
- D. Ngag: It refers to a form of mantra chanting.

3. Traditional Medicines For Healing Purpose

Ayurvedic medicines are commonly used. A yellow-colored medicine, typically in the form of roots, is sourced from deep forests, especially mountainous areas. It is known to cure mouth ulcers, cancers, and mild flu. In ancient times, diseases like Measles and Typhoid were prevalent. Medicines were prepared by blending 2-3 types of local wild plants. For example, remedies for Typhoid were derived from the roots of yellow-colored plants similar to turmeric, red-colored roots found on small wild stones, the roots of ginger-like leaves, and both the roots and leaves of a common plant called tselā-gorgor.

Traditional Naturopathist: Naturopathy is a form of treatment that avoids pharmaceutical drugs and surgical interventions. This approach emphasizes the utilization of natural agents like air, water, and herbs, as well as physical methods such as tissue manipulation and electrotherapy.

4. Traditional Bone Setter (TBS)

A lay practitioner of joint manipulation, also known as a bone specialist, often possesses a wealth of knowledge surpassing that of many other doctors.

Originating from the relentless pursuit of animals like bears and monkeys, certain individuals acquired a profound comprehension of the human body and its bone structure. Through closely observing these animals, they developed an intricate understanding of the workings of the entire human body and skeletal system.

The healing techniques involve massage and fixing, utilization of burned iron, and predicting and identifying problems by touching the affected area, with the ability to treat various issues including fractures, dislocated bones, and nerve problems, earning recognition for their effectiveness throughout the Mon-region.

5. Umbilical Cord Care / Navel Displacement Problem

Displacement of the navel, often regarded as the most common issue among babies, can occur during moments of extreme physical activity such as running or dancing, or even due to jerks experienced while traveling. Some attribute this phenomenon to the belief in 'Nyoba', suggesting the influence of malevolent forces. This problem is not exclusive to infants and can affect individuals of all ages. Despite the development in medical treatments, there are instances where conventional methods prove ineffective. However, in such cases, indigenous healing practices have been known to work wonders, offering a miraculous solution where modern medicine falls short.

A bronze like metal is used to relocate the displaced navel. And it is cured with chanting of mantras.

The healing technique they learned from ancestors during early days, many people used to follow this practice. In modern times, it is practiced on a small scale. Previously, outsiders were unaware, but at the present, even outsiders visit the land to seek healing. It is considered more effective and widely believed to be more authentic. According to ancestors, youngsters should preserve this healing practices.

6. Pla-Shoishi (shadow of soul goes away)

Due to sudden incident of fear, the soul shadow gets lost. When diagnosed with this, a normal human mind does not work, remains inactive, gloomy and gets depressed, practitioners does (Pla-Thukshi) soul calling.

Materials required: 1 (one) Bracelet, 1 (one) walnut, 1 (one) spoon, 1 (one) knee bone of any animal, Yeyss (Puffed rice), Khaada (Tibetan scarf), Shangkor (winnowing basket)

Process: In a jungle-like area among nature, yeyss is thrown. A small insect-like creature, in green color with white portion in the back needs to be spotted and brought along with a small wooden stick. It is then sprinkled (thukshi) in all the directions, namely East(SHAR), South (LHO), West(NUB), North(JANG). Prayers are offered to deities such as Luu (naak), gepo, and tsan during this process. The entire procedure is performed to implore the deities to return the soul shadow of a particular individual mentioned in the local zodiac (lobta). The spotted insect is then placed inside a small cotton ball. Along with a traditional thread necklace, it is worn by the sick person. After few days, the soul shadow returns from where it went, and the person regains health and vitality.

7. Zomo-Shoishi

'Zomo-shoishi' is meant to be done four times a year. It is believed that 'Rimba' virus is sent from Metropolitan cities. Hence, this practice is done, so that the virus does not enter the premise of the village. The time period for this ritual healing to last over is nearly 4.5 hour.

Material needed: 61 no of Phanshings of bamboos are needed. Traditional items such as white airi (ancient cloth), Shingka, totong (female attires) Sha Gram shing (specific wood from forest), flower named Namkaling, Sheep wool, two vessel called Shomba needs to be filled with cooked rice, small flat fish (25 pcs), Boiled Dangsum (fiddlehead, scientific name is *Diplazium esculentum*) to be offered to Lord Zomo

with Chhamin(local spicy sauce) among Tsok. Even local liquor called Aara/Bangchhang is required in a gourd like bottle (2 pcs), seeds of Phhargrun-tsun and Aashum(maize). Hence, a statue of Goat is made from local flour (Zomo's Chhipa). It is believed that the deities who is worshipped in this ritual ride is Goat, acts as a vehicle.

Conclusion

The indigenous healing practices among the Monpa tribe in Northeastern India hold significant cultural, spiritual, and practical importance in addressing various ailments and promoting well-being. Through spiritual healing practices like Mo, Lha-Jyugshi, and Zhabthui, as well as ritual healing methods such as Chhoga and ShirnyingDuidog, the Monpa community maintains a deep connection with their traditions and environment. Moreover, the utilization of traditional medicines, naturopathy, and the expertise of bone setters further exemplify the holistic approach to healthcare embedded within their culture.

However, despite their efficacy and cultural significance, these healing practices face challenges such as the lack of comprehensive documentation and threats to biodiversity due to modernization. The challenge includes a noticeable hesitance among the younger generations to participate in learning in the skills of a traditional healer, this poses a threat to the existence of the traditional healing practices. Efforts to integrate indigenous healthcare into broader healthcare systems should prioritize the preservation of traditional knowledge while addressing these challenges. The lack of proper scientific documentation of the methods of traditional healing and scarcity of medicinal plants has put the practice on the path of irrelevance.

By recognizing the resilience and relevance of indigenous healing practices, we can ensure the continuity of cultural heritage and improve healthcare access for indigenous communities.

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