

Shadows of the Sacred Hunt: Ethnohistorical Insights into Poison Procurement Rituals and Kinship Networks among the Millangs of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract:

The Millangs are a subgroup of the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, originally from the villages of Holon, Dalbing, and Peki Modi in Upper Siang district, who are known for speaking an unintelligible dialect gomru within the Adi linguistic cluster. In the pre-colonial and early colonial periods, inter-tribal and intra-tribal warfare and conflict were part of everyday life, and since early times the tribal communities have maintained traditional systems of defense and offense of their own. This article examines the Millangs' distinctive role as the primary suppliers of amu (a poison produced from the aconite plant) to other Adi groups, especially the Minyongs of Riga village, as part of an alliance system. It analyzes the Millangs' traditional practice of community expedition for aconite-hunting, known as Decha, carried out in high snowy mountains believed to be inhabited by malevolent spirits. The study documents the rituals, taboos, and cosmological beliefs that structured these expeditions, highlighting how ecological knowledge, spiritual cosmology, and political alliance converged in Millang material culture. These findings contribute to ethnographic understanding of tribal warfare, resource-based alliances, and ritualized subsistence practices among Northeast Indian indigenous societies.

Keywords: Millangs, Gomru, Decha, Alliance, Rituals, Taboos.

Introduction

The Millangs are one of the sub-groups of the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. The term Millang is an exonym, used by non-members of the Millang community who refer to them as Millang group. The Millang preferred themselves to be called Holon/Mala and they refer to their village same as Holon, but the other Adi sub-group and other tribes called their village Millang. Originally there was only one Millang village during their initial settlement, but due to conflict and feuds and in need to extend their land resources they split into three villages; Millang, Dalbing and Peki-Modi. The three Millang villages lie between 94°95' North Latitude and 28°29' East Longitude in the Mariyang sub-division, Upper Siang District, with total population of 3000 approximately according to 2011 Census India.ⁱ The land inhabited by the Millang consists almost entirely of high hill ranges, which are separated from one another by ridges and furrows. The region is popular for different varieties of orchids and for Aconite Phyllum.ⁱⁱ Like most of the tribal communities, the Millangs do not have a written records of their history and culture. They have been not exposed to the outside world for decades and their area have been rarely visited by

anthropologist, and colonial rule had a very limited impact on them, which result on the limitation of written records. Nevertheless, they have preserved their past through memories in the form of oral traditions. It is in this background that the present work seeks discuss about Decha and its associated rituals and taboos.

Decha

For the collection or harvesting of amu (poison or toxins made from aconite plant), every able and capable Millang man used to go to the high snowy mountains annually between the months of October to December. This traditional community expedition of collecting Amu, was known as Decha among the Millangs. The collection of Amu was an important part of their traditional practices. Since ancient times Amu is used as poisons or toxins, which is smeared on arrowheads used during hunting and, in earlier periods, were also used in inter-tribal warfare and conflicts. It is told that only those who were both mentally and physically capable were eligible to for the expedition. Hence, the one who went to the expedition in collecting poison were respected and regarded as brave in the Millang society.

The Millangs believe that evil spirits guard the place and the spirits do not like the encroachers in their land and this evil spirits always look for any chance to harm humans by any means. Hence, before they started to collect poison, they made offerings to the spirits of the mountains. While their way to the village they have to perform a number of rituals and the priest along with the villagers receives them and other members from neighboring villages who want to enjoy the Decha Deloⁱⁱⁱ perform after the expedition has taken place. The practice of Decha has been discontinued but the Decha Delo is performed till today by the Millangs on special occasions of celebrations or showcase. Therefore, the Amu was considered as most important entity with the help of which the hunting was possible and killed the enemies by smearing the poison on arrows. To protect and guard the mountains rich in Amu was the reason behind the establishment of Peki Modi village.^{iv} In the past the Milangs were considered as the largest supplier of Amu to the Adis brethren, particularly to the Minyongs of Riga village (Siang District).

Aconite, also known as monkshood, wolf's bane, devil's helmet, queen of poison etc. is a genus of over 250 species of flowering plants belonging to the family Ranunculaceae and are chiefly found in mountainous parts of Northern Hemisphere, there species are extremely poisonous and must be dealt carefully. There are different colors of aconite flower such as white, yellow, purple and pale greenish-yellow etc.^v The local names of aconite among the Millangs are Rumdum with yellow flower, Totok with white flower, Namdung and Tapyak. The preparation of Amu from collected aconite roots and tubers is done after performing a number of rituals and sacrifices. The collectors contributed a fixed amount of Amu from everyone's share to the Gabang Banggo Apo (village council share) for collective purposes in the future. It was announced by the village council upon every adult male to gather in Ngaptek (men's dormitory) for the preparation of poison for collective purpose such as warfare and hunting. Collected aconite roots and tubers are dried in the sun, then grind into powder. This powder is then mixed with water and other poisonous plants. Then the poison is plastered onto the tip of the arrows and spears and was kept on the rack, Akya, over the fireplace called Ami Mirom and left to dry. The slightest touch of the poison can lead to tragic consequences hence plastering the tip of the arrow was done with the help of blade, which is kept separately. The same method of preparation of poison was applied to their own shares. When the poison is well dried, the men started on hunting to test its potency.^{vi}

The history and culture of the Millangs are found in their oral traditions in the form of myths, folklores, tales etc. These oral traditions remained in their memories, which are passed on through generations in

oral form from the very earliest times. Thus, they have their own traditional myth regarding the origin of Amu (aconite), which goes like this:

Doyi yipa papu ki mase Banji seri Mone sipen jakke

Papu isi rabadum ami yabo ko, marma dobanum ngenge yaboko

Dimu riksengu momem chel, Siri ridom jagoke papu simuk ko

Papu ki mitting anggingu, tumkan goranu amu pi garyab ko^{vii}

Translation: Doyi yipa Papu's wife Banji seri Mone died. Papu could not bear the pain of his wife's death, he was weeping in woe while searching for her everywhere. He looked for her everywhere; jungles, rivers and in the high mountains, at last reaching the kingdom of Dimu Taya and Dimu Nane where he kept on weeping and finally died there. The different body parts of Papu morphed into varieties of plants and the genital grew into Amu.^{viii}

The place, where Papu died is believed to belong to Dimu Taya, so it naturally comes under his jurisdiction. Dimu Nane, the wife of Dimu Taya commended Taiyi (a poisonous bee) to guard the place where Papu died. Then Taiyi accidentally/mysteriously made an intercourse with the dead body of Papu, which is why it is believed that the Amu became poisonous. After knowing the poisonous character of Amu, the human beings (Millangs) started to collect it by lying to Dimu Taya while offering him, that they human beings have come to the place to sow seeds.

Aconite expedition among the Millangs was a gruesome journey in the snowy mountains in collecting aconite. The names of the mountains in this region where the aconite plant is found are: Dema, Kabak, Chaghe, Pelo etc. The whole journey was marched by foot and it took almost a week to reach the destination. The first night was spent at a place, Saram Laktang near Peki Modi village, the second night at, Damdi, on third day they used to reach and take rest in the evening at Ajor seh from where it took 2 to 3 hours to reach the mountains having Amu. On the third mid night they continue their journey and start collecting poison from early morning and after collecting the satisfy amount of poison they immediately take their journey back at the evening of the same day because they believed that sleeping there is like risking own life to the dwellers (evil spirits) of the snowy aconite mountains. When they reached the vicinity of the village started to perform rituals to avert evil spirits. After that they used to perform a folkdance called Decha Delo near the ground of men's dormitory in the village. The neighboring villages used to come to enjoy this folkdance when Decha was on practice.^{ix}

The practice of Decha has been discontinued some decades ago because there is no need of poison anymore as no inter-village war occurs these days and hunting weapons and tools have been replaced with modern one. But the Milangs still, today perform Decha Delo folkdance on special occasions.

Ritual associated with Decha

It is believed that the Amu Ade (aconite mountains) is the dwelling place of the malevolent spirit Dimu Taya, his wife Dimu Nane, and his general Banji Banmang and other malevolent spirits of jungles, deep gorges, rivers etc. and all the dense forests are believed to be the home of evil spirits called Apom. All these evil spirits are believed to be assuming the forms of human wives and dear ones and try to seduce man on their way to the jungles for hunting, collecting poison and other purposes in order to bring obstacles in their journey and to deprive them of precious poison. These spirits don't like any trespassers in their kingdom of evil spirits. The Millangs also believed that there are many Achok (unknown and stranger souls) exist on the way to the high mountains that have lost their ways to their destiny; they are notorious and try to harm the trespassers. Therefore, the Millang people used to performed rituals and

taboos during an expedition for the collection of aconite and they have to make offerings to appease the spirits before start taking anything from the territory of the malevolent spirits. If the spirits are not pleased with what is offered, one is believed to be doomed.

After reaching the destination of their journey first of all they have to make ritual offering consist of Adu (cooked rice), Ayu (rice beer) and Adin (meat) to appease the spirits of the mountains. While offering, prayer is also chanted to the spirits, Dimu Taya and Dimu Nane as “we have come here from a very far place. We need some herbal poisonous roots from your treasure for our limited use. We are not here to snatch the whole treasure from the lap of you Mother Nature Dimu nane! We are offering you foods and drinks allow us to take a small amount of the poisonous roots and as many, as we reap, that many we promise to saw back into your garden”.^x After that, when they start to collect this poison, they also shout five times ‘Hoh! Hoh! Hoh! to drive away the evil spirits.

The Millangs hold great respect for the maternal uncles; in this expedition, they guide their nephews in familiarizing them with the aconite plant, which is a traditional ritual practice known as Tangak, and in return of this process of familiarizing, the nephew presents to their maternal uncle gifts consist of Ayu, Adu and Aabung (dried rat meat) on their return at home.^{xi}

The aconite expeditioners are not allowed to come back directly to the village. After their long journey by crossing many mountains, rivers etc. it is believed that evil spirits may follow them. So, they used to take rest at a place, Kita Papim, named after a big tree, which is considered as a boundary between human beings and evil spirits by the Millangs. It has historical importance because it has been used as a resting place during their migration to the present Holon village and it has been used as a resting place also by the poison collecting teams and hunters since very early days, and here the expedition team put up their Decha Delo dresses and start their rituals to avert evil spirits that believed to be followed them from the ways they have been passes through.

When they reach Kita Papim, they used to spend the last night of their journey there. The womenfolk (either wife or sister) carry food and drinks for them at evening time and believe that evil spirits would return to their places seeing their wives. The women then went back to village at the same evening. At night the expedition team make fire place and all of them seat around it, one person of the expedition team who is good enough in traditional knowledge, starts chanting their prayer to invoke benevolent spirits to protect them from the dooms of evil spirits if the priest did not come along with them at the expedition. On the following morning womenfolk again carry meals for breakfast at early morning at Kita Papim, and this time they carry with them the belongings of expedition team such as swords, spear, beads, hat and coats made of animal hide, etc. which has to be used for the ritual folkdance Decha Delo to ward off evil spirits. They get up in jungle camouflage dress from head to toe in a manner to disguise themselves from malevolent spirits and holding their swords on right hand and spear on the left. Then precede their journey in queue line towards the village. Most active and distinct part in this ritual was taken up by the two persons each in the front and bottom. Two persons in the front distinctly dress up in warrior attire consist of war helmet, coat, beads, holding swords and spear in their both hands and fence their sword while jumps here and there shouting Hih Hih! to ward away if any evil spirit comes up their way, the other followers shouting Hoh! Hoh! The other two persons at the bottom walking in queue line distinguished themselves by covering their whole body from head to toe with jungle camouflage dress and holding two brooms made of bushes in each hand. With the two brooms in each hand, they erase everyone’s footprint including their own and for that, they have to walk facing backwards, this set of action was known as Tapek Pekma.

On their way to the village, the same two persons at the bottom by assuming as male and female try to bewilder the evil spirits by asking and introducing to in secret names resembles to evil spirits.

These two persons at the bottom assume to be the friends of malevolent spirits and introduced themselves as Longko (as a male), from Pelo mountain and Genyi (as a female), from Chageh mountain. These mountains are the dwelling place of malevolent spirits where the aconites are abundant.

Then move towards the village, while on their way to the village, they were received by the womenfolk of their village well ahead of the Ngaftek (men's dormitory) holding Toti-Bangko plant (plant believe to have magical powers to ward off the evil spirits) in their hands. With this plant the womenfolk brush the hands and legs of the expedition team. Having seen the womenfolk of the village with holding Toti-Bangko plant at the entrance of the village or men's dormitory, all the evil spirits believed to have run away, if still accompanying the expedition team there.

A renowned Madar, a priest standing near ngaptek ground and recites the chanting to invoke all the benevolent spirits to protect and avert away if any possible unwanted follower (evil spirits) follows the poison expedition team. The priest recites the chanting to summon the benevolent deities and invoke those deities by praising them in chanting.

They performed the Decha Delo to its fullest form after reaching the village and it was performed on the ground near men's dormitory. It was enjoyed by all the villagers including the neighbor villagers. After performing this ritual folkdance, they directly proceed to the men's dormitory.

After all these, all the Amu was brought inside the Ngaptek, kept everyone's Amu together on the floor where a fowl was made to sacrifice, and to increase the potency of the Amu, the blood of the sacrificed fowl is sprinkled over it. After this ritual, a fixed amount of bundle of Amu has to be compulsorily contributed to the village council from every household who went to expedition for collective purposes like warfare and game. From their own share of Amu, they presented it to the Minyongs of Riga village and a bundle of Amu were also given to the relatives, particularly to the elderly maternal uncles and nephews who were not able to participate in the expedition. The maternal uncles and nephews in return of Amu presents Adu Payekl, (one rice bundle wrapped in Atkyam, (leaf) Ayu, (local wine made from rice or Mirung, finger millet) Gabung or Gajok adin (dried rat or squirrel meat). This ritual also comes under ritual of exchange in maintaining and strengthening family relationships. After all these rituals, on the following day whole villager observed one day taboo called Wueh Rehma. It is believed that aconites are not poisonous before bring it to the Ngaftek and performing rituals. When the poison is almost ready, all the able men go for hunting to test its effectiveness.

Taboo associated with Decha

Because of the belief that the mountains where Amu is found believed to be belongs to number of evil spirits note above, during Decha the expedition team were prohibit to call their real names or disclose themselves in the jungles, if do so the evil spirits of the jungles, mountains and rivers etc. would hear it and they will try to trick any member of the Decha team by assuming one of their dear ones.

After the collection of Amu and the arrival on the Decha team the whole member of the village observed taboo for one day, this taboo was called Wueh Rehma.^{xiii} On this taboo restriction on movement was observed; men as well as women were not allowed to go to the agricultural fields, man were restricted to go on jungle, hunting and fishing etc. During the preparation of the poison, the man who joins the preparation team was not allowed to sleep with their wives for several days. The drinking of Aayu was

also tabooed on man while preparing poison and do not eat hot rice because they believed that heat has a bad effect on poison.

A woman has to observed taboos during when their husband went for community hunting and collecting poison in the jungles. A wife has to prohibit herself from any weaving and spinning and to avoid herself from eating vegetables produce by creepers until her husband return to home. She is restricted weaving and spinning because it is believed that doing such activity would distort the jungle norms and she restricted herself from eating vegetables and fruits produce by creeper plants in fear that her husband's feet would be entangled with jungle creepers and would meet with an accident. The wives obey these taboos to protect their husband from all the evil spirits of the jungles and to appease the evil spirits particularly to Dimu Taya.

During their man preparing poison the wives were forbidden to prepare fresh Aayu and Nugin in believe that it would toxic the poison. Some also said that the women were tabooed to husk paddy during their husband were engaged in preparing poison. Any violation of the taboos by wives mentioned would bring dooms to her husband's life.

The Millangs with the practice of collecting poison annually, there used to be a custom of contribution of Amu, called Amu Giram annually as souvenir or gift to the Minyongs of Riga, because Riga people always stood with the Millangs in the past against their enemies and amu was contributed to the Minyongs of the Riga to maintain their alliances. The women also took participation in traditional practice of the contribution of amu annually to the Riga people. During such practices the Millangs were welcomed warmly by the Riga people and they organize big feast on that occasion.^{xiii} The elders of both the village still remember this practice of giving Amu to the Riga people.

Conclusion

The Millangs Decha tradition was not only a poison-collecting expedition but also a ritual system shaped by spirit beliefs, taboos, kinship duties, and village solidarity. It linked hunting, protection, reciprocity, and cultural identity, and today it survives mainly in the form of Decha Delo and collective memory.

References

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