

**RECENT ADVANCES IN  
FOLK MEDICINE  
RESEARCH  
IN NORTH EAST INDIA**

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Recent Advances in Folk Medicine Research in North East India

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## Chapter 16

### **At the Cultural Crossroads: A Portrait of a Galo Shaman**

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#### **Abstract**

The Galo shamans belong to the fast disappearing traditional healers of the Eastern Himalayas. In an ideal traditional setting, the shaman is the performer of rites and rituals as also of social memory. Some shamans exhibit knowledge of herbal healing, an art not specialised by all the shamans and often practised by people other than shamans. Indigenous healing systems or folk medicine today faces a different scenario: coming of Western Biomedicine; neo-faith healing; re-organised indigenous faith, etc. This article is a short sketch of a performing shaman (*Nyibu*) through whose experiences a brief exposition on the contemporary condition of the shamans would be made. It also raises the question about the place and future of the shaman in the context of the reformed indigenous religions.

**Keywords:** Shaman, Eastern Himalaya, Folk Medicine, Indigenous Faith, Arunachal Pradesh.



The art of curing ailments and diseases through indigenous methods is a very old tradition. Among the early societies, diseases were linked to 'possession by evil spirits' and spells and drugs were accordingly formulated (Childe, 1957). 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 prefer the term 'native healer' since it represents the cultural perspective of the tradition the shaman is part of (Lake, 2007). 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' (Nishimura, 1987). Writing about Shamanism among the Tungus of eastern Siberia in S.M. 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, who suffer from the spirits' (Nishimura, 1987). These definitions were broadly summarized by Kokan Sasaki in *Shamanizumu no jinruigaku* (The Anthropology of Shamanism) 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' (Nishimura 1987:59). Thus, a shaman was the link between the material and the spiritual world of the people- a function fulfilled by a Galo shaman also. It is argued by Mercea 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' (Jones, 1968).

These definitions of shaman and shamanism can be inferred to describe the shamans of various communities of Arunachal Pradesh also. The shamans are the bedrock of indigenous healing system. Forster and Anderson defined ethnomedicine 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' (Anquandah, 1997). The ethno-medical practice or folk medicine of the people of Arunachal Pradesh is rooted in religious beliefs and shaped by the local ecology, physical environment and customs. In a sense, it is agreeable that the concept of illness is basically rooted in supernatural cosmology as argued by a noted anthropologist who studied the Arunachal tribes (Elwin, 1999). The idea of disease/ailments, accidents, epidemics, and famine is construed as occurring as a result of 'breach' of the balance with natural and supernatural forces ('malevolent spirits') among the shamanistic communities of Arunachal Pradesh. For example, when a person meets with an accident the shaman negotiates (through rituals) with the spirits to safely 'retrieve' the *Yalo* (soul?) of the affected person from the offended spirits.



## Objectives

From the 1950s Arunachal Pradesh was opened up for new impactful changes: expansion of government administrative machinery, roadways, introduction of Western Biomedicine (henceforth WBM), education, increasing population contact and powerful cultural influences. The degree of this process was described by Verrier Elwin as "creating the puzzle of the impact of the atomic age on a Stone Age" (Guha, 2000). Naturally, these influences were bound to have important, fundamental impacts. It has been a good seven decades since Elwin's time and this paper aims to discuss the nature of such impacts on the career of a shaman. The two immediate references for making this assessment are changing environment and the renewed interpretation and projection of indigenous religion itself.

## Material and Methods

This quick essay is ethno-historical in orientation. A brief profile of a practicing shaman is being presented. The data has been collected through oral interview. The rites and ritual performances of the shaman are not being discussed. *Emic* perspective is inherent since the author is born and bred in the same cultural milieu as the shaman- reason why I have not provided any transcript of the interview with the shaman. For the same reason, survey of existing literature on Galo shamans has not been done. No special field-study was conducted on the reformed indigenous religion as family members of the author are directly involved in its practice and propagation.

## Results and Discussion

Roughly equidistant from Tibet in the north, the Assam plains in the south, Siang River in the east and Subansiri River in the west lay Bipi village of Liromoba in the central West Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh. Born in c.1940, Tama Mindo Romin is a *Nyibu* (shaman) and a propagator of the Donyi Polo faith (reformed indigenous religion) who no longer lives at his ancestral village Bipi. As is common for would-be *Nyibu*'s, young Tama was 'kidnapped' by the *Yapom* (forest spirits believed to be of feminine gender) while asleep to be recovered by village folks from the nearby rivulet later on. Attracted to entrepreneurship and thus no interested in becoming a *Nyibo*, Tama left his ancestral village and started doing petty government contract works- a formative period of spiritual journey to shaman-hood later in life. In 1969, he adopted the Christian faith after coming into contact with Catholic Missionaries at Gandhigram in Vijaynagar in the Patkai Hills. Un-affected by his conversion, the *Yapoms*<sup>1</sup> again ventured to 'kidnap' Tama; this time the *Yapo*

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<sup>1</sup> The *Yapom* is colloquially referred to in plural. The 's' here is a loose Anglicization. One of the earliest record of *Yapom* 'kidnapping' can be found in Elwin 1959:266. Such incidents are regularly reported till today.



were persistent. Circa, 1974, Tama was on a regular visit to the Shiva Mandir at Raneghat in Pasighat town. The temple premise hosted a huge banyan tree (locally called *sirek/hirek*), a locally believed to be the favourite abode of the Yapoms. In the 'custody' of the relentless Yapoms, Tama had ecstatic experience of running across rivers and jumping over the mountains that divide the foothill town from hinterland. Along (Aalo) headquarters - a distance the Yapoms helped him cover within a couple of hours in superman-style, literally. As expected, the Yapoms finally had the upper hand and a new poet stepped-in to a mystic world where the chosen few conversed with the spirits- as the plenipotentiary of the mortal beings. A shaman is born.

Tama specialises in what might be called 'prosperity' and 'cure' rituals (*GuminUyi*) as distinct from the types of rituals related to disputes, death, murder, etc. (*Yalu-YachuUyi*). Based on such specialisation, as well as the occult reputation, Galo shamans are viewed in loose hierarchical order at the pinnacle of which Tama considers himself to belong to. He is thus a *Gumin Nyibo* (indicating the type of rituals he performs) as well as a *Nyib-Buut* (suggestive of his position and reputation). As to whether his standing was equal to or above the *Tago-Nyigre* Nyibu, a shaman who can take the form of wild beasts, notably the tiger, like Kachi Yomcha (Riba, 2004) Tama avoided any comparison with the renowned late shaman who lived a generation before him in his home district.

Tama's long and ongoing career is dotted by many feats: curing a dysenteric (*Takw*) and a Yapom-infested patient each who would not get relief from medical treatment, for example. In the latter case, a Sikh engineer employed under the state government had incurred the wrath of the Yapoms while supervising jungle-clearing for a road project eventually found cure for his medically unexplained recurring vertigo after Tama checked the omen and negotiated a deal with the offended Yapoms.

At personal front, our shaman claims that he is a teetotaler since childhood and is quick to issue the disclaimer that he does not eat cattle-meat because of allergy. In 1987, he helped in organizing the Abotani Shaman Association as its first General Secretary. At the time of my interview, Tama headed the ecclesiastical wing of the Indigenous Faith and Cultural Society of Arunachal Pradesh (IFCSAP) as its president. The IFCSAP currently leads the indigenous faith movement in Arunachal Pradesh; the process has been described as 'reformist' in the 'contested domains of religious transformation...' (Chaudhari 2013:259-277). Under the aegis of the IFCSAP and other sister organisations, Tama occasionally attends training workshops in different places where he gets to meet shamans from other regions and cultures from across the diverse country.

When enquired about the future of the shamans and shamanistic rites and rituals, the enthusiasm in the room quickly dissipated and Tama responded with a disheartened tone citing factors for a bleak future of the shamans as well as reasons

why religious reform was necessary: coming of new ways of life: non-observance of indigenous ways of life and taboos; change in food habits; negligence of indigenous religion and its methods of healing; and adoption of new religious faiths. Food avoidance (of certain types, not only before and after performing rituals), according to Tama, was one of the strict discipline a shaman was supposed to keep thereby highlighting some universals shamans across cultures share: 'many abstentions may be interpreted as a type of primitive preventive medicine...Not only the individual, but also the whole community may derive psychological benefits from the avoidance of certain foods' (Ferro-Luzzi, 1975).

### Conclusion

Tama's stress during the course of our extended interview was on two things: cure of many patients, who did not get relief from modern medical treatment, through the shaman's intervention and; the future of the shamans. The first case reinforces the idea and relevance of medical pluralism. The second aspect throws some light on the decline in the number of shamans and the changing role of shaman within the structure of the reformed indigenous religions. Until his generation, a Galo shaman like Tama was alien to the idea of a place of worship and congregation. Being a shaman and thus a key stakeholder of the indigenous religious life, Tama contributed to the efforts for re-organising the indigenous religions where the mode of worship<sup>2</sup> was different from the propitiatory rituals of the original shaman-hood. For example, *Ganggi* is a prayer hall where reformed indigenous faith believers meet weekly, offer prayers and seek cure from ailments and diseases also.

It can be visualised that within the confines of the *Ganggi*, shamans like Tama would be not be able to perform the shamanistic rituals. An irony stems from the genuine apprehensions and works of shaman cum religious reform workers like Tama: one of the results of religious reform is to uniquely put a shaman in a devotional-congregational environment where the shamanistic chants and rituals are no longer to be found. Unlike Tama and his colleagues in the indigenous religious reform movement, there are many shamans and people who do not attend the *Ganggi* considering the reformed practices to be equally 'alien'. This underlines the complexity and multi-positional nature of the religious reform movement in Arunachal Pradesh of which Tama is a part of.

### Acknowledgement

The interview of the shaman was done as part of my recently awarded (2017) Ph.D. work titled "Development of Healthcare System in Arunachal Pradesh 1826-1987". A related paper named "A Priests' Chant: Healing Traditions among

<sup>2</sup>For details on the types and nature of indigenous faith movements in Arunachal Pradesh see Chaudhury 2013.



the Galo tribe, Arunachal Pradesh, India" appears in the *Saudi Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 2:11, Nov 2017: 1058-1061. While the data and methods remain same the organisation, focus and analysis of this article is different from the preceding two works. I received travel grants from the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR) for field-works during PhD study.

### Note on Indigenous Terms

The vernaculars appearing in this article is in Galo language- a branch of Tani language cluster. The Tani languages (belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family), which share common roots and basic vocabulary, are spoken in central Arunachal and parts of upper Assam. There is no study on the archaic and shamanistic vocabulary of the Tani languages.

### Interviews

Information about Tama Mindo was gathered through personal interview with the shaman at his residence at A-Sector, Naharlagun, Arunachal Pradesh on January 6, 2017.

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