

# **PROJECT REPORT**

**2016-18**

Scheme for Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) &  
Diverse Cultural Traditions of India

## **Songs of Shaman as Intangible Cultural Heritage: A Living Tradition of Arunachal Pradesh**

Submitted to

Intangible Cultural Heritage Cell  
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By

Dr. Bina Gandhi Deori

Dept. of Ancient Indian History Culture and Archaeology  
Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan  
West Bengal -731235  
INDIA

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## CERTIFICATE

I, Dr. Bina Gandhi Deori, declare that the work presented in this report entitled **The Songs of Shaman as Intangible Cultural Heritage: A Living Tradition of Arunachal Pradesh** is original and carried throughout by me during the complete tenure of the research project of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) Cell, Sangeet Natak Akademi, National Academy of Music, Dance & Drama (An Autonomous Body of Ministry of Cultural), Govt. of India, Rabindra Bhawan, Feroze Shah Road, New Delhi-110 001.



Bina Gandhi Deori, Ph. D  
Assistant Professor  
Dept of Ancient Indian  
History Culture &  
Archaeology  
Visva-Bharati University,  
Santiniketan-731235  
West Bengal, INDIA

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Lastly, the final outcome of this project required a lot of assistance from many people and I am extremely privileged to have got this all along the completion of my project.



Bina Gandhi Deori

# CHAPTER 1

## **Intangible Cultural Heritage and UNESCO Convention**

The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage defines intangible heritage as the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage.

The importance of Intangible Cultural Heritage has been lately realized globally as evidenced by the UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003). The notion of intangible cultural heritage covers a vast field:

1. Oral Traditions and expressions, language
2. Performing Arts
3. Social Practices, rituals and festive events
4. Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe
5. Traditional Craftsmanship

India is among the few countries in the world where the continuity in its indigenous craft, traditions, beliefs and skills have survived over centuries. For many communities in India, the intangible cultural heritage is the essential source of an identity, deeply rooted in the past. India`s vast cultural diversity is itself an essential component of its intangible cultural heritage. India supports the aims and safeguarding measures that are promoted through UNESCO`s 2003 Convention. This is reflected by India`s ratification of the 2003 Convention in 2005. A year after the ratification, the UNESCO office in New Delhi hosted a meeting to promote the Convention and encourage its ratification amongst Asian member states. Moreover, in the year 2006, delegates from India participated in the first session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the 2003 Convention where procedures for its implementation were discussed. In early 2007, an expert meeting concerned with elaborating the selection criteria for the two international lists, the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding was also convened by representatives from the Indian Ministry of Culture and UNESCO office in New Delhi. These efforts on the part of India reflect its eagerness in preserving and safeguarding its Intangible Cultural Heritage in whatever form it is.

Dr Yim<sup>1</sup> pointed out that “academic research on shamanism so far globally has been focusing on doctrine, rituals, and the shaman itself. She suggested, however, that future research should focus on the shaman community to

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<sup>1</sup> Shaman Heritage as Intangible Cultural Heritage, *The Intangible Cultural Heritage Courier of Asia and the Pacific*, 1.

develop international cooperative measures for safeguarding it as an ICH. She also mentioned that the shaman heritage possesses humanistic, egalitarian, communitarian, communicational, and reconcilable values, and she highlighted that those values should be more disseminated through institutional education”.

The shamanic tradition has been identified as an extremely important part of knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe. Leng Dong, one of the nation’s representative Shaman rituals from Vietnam was registered on the national intangible cultural heritage list. Therefore, following in the lines of the UNESCO Convention for the protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage, this project aims to document the ancient traditional knowledge of the institution of shamanism of Arunachal Pradesh.

### **Study Region:**

India is a vast country of diverse cultures, characterized by more ethnic and religious groups than most other countries of the world. The continuity in its indigenous craft, traditions, beliefs and skills has survived over centuries. For many communities in the India, intangible cultural heritage is the essential source of identity deeply rooted in the past.





Fig.1. Map of Arunachal Pradesh

Northeast India has unbroken living vibrant traditions, so is the case of Arunachal Pradesh. Arunachal Pradesh is the north-eastern most state of India, located in the foothills of the Himalayas bordering Bhutan in the west, Tibet in the north-west, Myanmar in the east and China in the north.

The state of Arunachal Pradesh is a mountainous terrain. It is a land of diverse ethnic communities and cultures. Linguistically, it is the most diverse state in India with 90 dialects. There are as many as twenty-six major tribes and several hundred sub-tribes with their own distinct cultural identities which present a unique scenario of unity in diversity in the state itself.

The population of Arunachal Pradesh is not uniform regarding their ethnic origins. Even after 72 years of India's independence, Arunachal Pradesh largely remains unexplored because of its remote location, difficult mountainous terrain and inaccessible topography. This isolation in a way preserved their traditional cultural forms in more or less pristine form.

Arunachal Pradesh has a rich repository of intangible cultural heritage in the forms of myths, legends, ritualistic chanting, folk songs, ballads, incantations etc.

### **Significance of the study:**

Archaeologically, Arunachal Pradesh is one of the least explored region and very meager findings have been documented so far. A considerable part of the material culture used by the people are wood and bamboo based, mainly perishable in nature, which leaves very narrow changes of its survival in the given climatic condition. Very little knowledge about the history of Arunachal Pradesh is known till date as most of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh except Khamti do not have a script of their own. The collections of the oral narrations and the repository of their traditional knowledge represented in these narrations have shaped the tribal history and culture. In many cases, some aspects of these traditions are still being carried forwarded by the members of the tribes. Therefore, in the absence of written script and lack of archaeological findings, intangible cultural heritage plays an important role as a source to understand the history of the indigenous people.

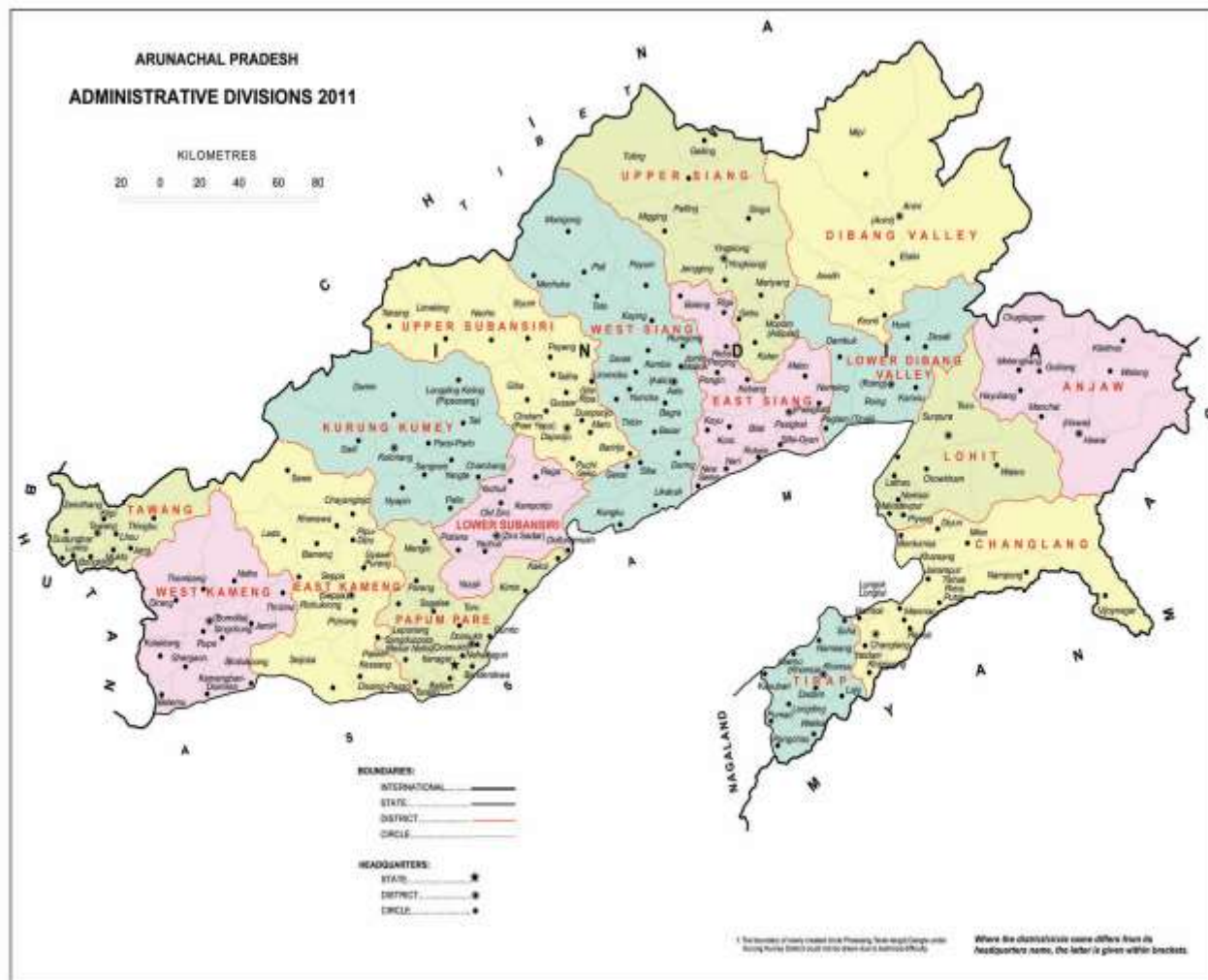


Fig 2: District wise map of Arunachal Pradesh

In the face of fast globalization which is posing a great threat to the survival of cultural pluralism, the need for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage has been felt worldwide. The ethnic /indigenous cultures suffer most from the effects of globalization. Modernization is taking its toll due to the rapid process of globalization and pervading influence of western culture. The processes of globalization and social transformation have given rise to the phenomena of deterioration and disappearance of the intangible cultural heritage with paucity of resources compounding the process. As the younger generations are more oriented towards the modern and western education, traditional practices such as rituals, traditional knowledge system, festivals, traditional craft or even the practice of ethnic cuisine are losing its original place of importance and priority in their minds. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that these cultural traditions should be documented in whatever form it can be for the future generations. The revitalization of intangible heritage is also essential for the promotion of cultural diversity which is most essential to create an environment of harmony in today's world.

### **Aims and Objectives of the study:**

This study is an effort to determine the basis for shamanism in Arunachal Pradesh and to present the concepts which crystallized various elements into shamanism. Shamanism in general is an essential tool for understanding any culture.

In an attempt to determine the basis for shamanism in Arunachal Pradesh this proposed research work attempts to:

1. Identify and document the various forms of shamanism in Arunachal Pradesh.
2. Determining the nature and forms of shamanism in Arunachal Pradesh.
3. To highlight outstanding and often endangered cultural expressions, spaces and practices of shamanism which includes their oral traditions , myths, legends, ritual chanting or narratives of their ritual etc.
4. Document and raise awareness of the cultural richness of the institution of shamanism and help ensure that tribal/ethnic identity does not lose its unique cultural identity.
5. Preserve these increasingly vulnerable intangible cultural traditions for posterity.
6. To raise awareness of the importance and values of shaman heritage.
7. To seek measures to safeguard this tradition through international cooperation.
8. To impart knowledge on and understanding of Shamanism (e.g. its history, spiritual significance, ways of performance, contemporary challenges, community participation) to researchers and professionals concerned with Shamanism and ritual performances;

## **Methodology:**

Different methods were employed to get the required data for this proposed research work.

1. Reviewed published materials on the subject which include analyzing primary records (Eg. Census, statistical reports, government gazettes, Cadastral records from different government departments)
2. Consulted secondary materials (Eg. Published books, research papers, journals and previous studies on the people and the region for a better conceptual understanding of the history and culture of the people.
3. Conducted field works in different villages in Arunachal Pradesh.
4. Research surveys were being carried out through interviews, participant observation and questionnaire method.
5. Systematic and regular interviews were conducted with the local people of the community to understand their beliefs and ideas about their customs, practices, religion, ritual related taboos etc. Exclusive interviews were conducted with some key shamans of different villages.
6. Recording the oral narration of the shamans.

7. Photographic and video graphic documentation: Attempts were made to document different ritualistic shamanistic performances and record the incantations by the use of audio-visual aids.

### **Potential contribution:**

The tangible outcomes of the proposed project are expected to lead to:

1. Enhanced research capacity for research on shamanism; broader and stronger recognition of the unique value and role of shamans as the keeper of traditional knowledge system.
2. This proposed research will help to build a database of the required information on different aspects of shamanism in Arunachal Pradesh.
3. The findings of the research will be presented in a format that is readily understandable and accessible to all stakeholders and particularly to those who provide the basis for the research findings. A volume of scholarly papers which details the results of the research work carried out as part of this project or the research finding will be presented in oral, written and visual forms in both indigenous and non- indigenous publications and forums.
8. The research will also be of academic benefit to those who are working on different aspects of shamanism in Northeast India especially Arunachal Pradesh. This research might open new research pathways which can be developed in future projects.

# CHAPTER 2

## Shamanism

The institution of shamanism is popular in many cultures all across the world. There is no geographic range of shamanic practitioners. Shamans and shamanism occur in most continents covering Russia, Siberia, Arctic Regions, Central Asia (Mongolia, Tibet), North and South America, South and Southeast Asia and Pacific Islands.

Though many common elements can be found in shamanism across Asia such as belief in spirits, communication with supernatural beings and shamanistic rituals, however there are also lots of complexities with the study of shamanism with a particular region also. There is diversity as well as complexity.

### Definitions of Shaman:

The term shamanism has been defined to mean many things over time and its scope and function also changed with time. The earliest definition of Shaman is given by Mircea Eliade in his book *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* as 1) A person<sup>2</sup> who represents the signs of vocation or at least of a religious crisis and are separated from the rest of the community by the intensity of their own religious experience and 2) A

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<sup>2</sup>Eliade, Mircea. *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, 8.



man<sup>3</sup> who has immediate, concrete experiences with gods and spirits; he or she interacts with them, prays to them, implores them, but does not ‘control’ more than a limited number of them.

Mircea Eliade<sup>4</sup> conceptualized shamanic practice as a technique of ecstasy. For him, shaman is also the great master of ecstasy.

Åke Hultkrantz<sup>5</sup> sees shamans as social functionaries who attain ecstasy with the help of guardian spirits in order to “create a rapport with the supernatural world”.

Cultural anthropologist McCurdy<sup>6</sup> defined shaman as a ‘religious specialist who controls supernatural power’.

Michael Harner<sup>7</sup> defined shaman as a ‘man or woman who is in direct contact with the spirit world through a trance state and has one or more spirits at command to carry out his bidding for good or evil’.

Merete D. Jakobsen<sup>8</sup> interprets a shaman as a master of spirits in the traditional society who conducts the role of communicating with spirits on behalf of an individual or society; “The shaman is in charge of this communication”. According to Thomas Du Bois<sup>9</sup>, the shaman is “an expert guide or authority in cosmic journeys” and he or she “performs<sup>10</sup> tasks for the good of clients or the community at large: negotiating or effecting cures,

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid, 88.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Hultkrantz 1993:6.

<sup>6</sup>Curdy & Spradley, 257.

<sup>7</sup>Michael Harner 1973.

<sup>8</sup>Jakobsen 1999, 9

<sup>9</sup>Du Bois 2009,41.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 82.

divining the future, leading the souls of the dead to their proper afterlife destination, securing luck or misfortune for individuals or their enemies”.

Richard McBride<sup>11</sup>, who carried out extensive research on Korean shamanism, says that “shamanism” is commonly defined as a belief in a world imperceptible for mortal humans; inhabited by supernatural being such as gods, demons, and ancestral spirits responsive only to “shamans”. They are also defined as religious specialists who use magic for the purpose of curing the sick, divining the hidden and controlling events.

These diverse definitions show the different dimensions of shaman as they are perceived in different context. Many a time, shaman is also equated with magician. Jakobsen provides a very clear distinction between the two. The most important difference between magician and shaman explored by Jakobsen<sup>12</sup> is that “the magician might use his power over spirits for personal gain, while the shaman, ideally, is using his skills on behalf of other people, or society as a whole”.

However, the first scientific definition of shaman is given by the Russian ethnographer V.M Mikhailovskii<sup>13</sup> who stated that the shaman is an intermediary in man's relations with the world of spirits”. According to Ake Hult Krantz in *Introductory Remarks on the study of shamanism* this definition given by Mikhailovskii is a very realistic and accurate

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<sup>11</sup>McBride 2006, 2

<sup>12</sup>Jakobsen 1999, 5

<sup>13</sup>V.M Mikhailovskii 1892, 67

characterization of the shaman's central meaning, his position as a mediator between two worlds: the natural world and the supernatural.

## **Shamanism in Arunachal Pradesh**

Shamanism is prevalent among different tribes in Arunachal Pradesh. Every tribe in Arunachal Pradesh has its own kind of ritual expert for performing rites and sacrifices. In almost all the previous writings, the term (indigenous) priest or shaman is used for them. Tani<sup>14</sup> people who trace their ancestry to *Abo Tani*<sup>15</sup>, believe that antiquity of Shamanism is as old as the emergence of humankind. The Buddhist tribes of Arunachal Pradesh despite having Buddhist religious priest, *Lama*, also have indigenous priest whose services are employed during certain occasions. Other tribes like, Wancho, Nocte and Tangsa also have indigenous priest to perform the rituals. However, despite the ubiquitous presence of the institution of shamanism academic research on shamanism is limited in Arunachal Pradesh.

Above all, shamanism of the Tani people is a manifestation of their religiosity, although, in addition to religious belief it contains a broad range of various cultural components. If we take a glimpse at any important religious ceremony that is representative of Tani shamanism, we see that it holds numerous elements of song, music, costumes, chants, ornaments, as well as fortune telling and oracular predictions. From this point of view, it

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<sup>14</sup> Tani group comprise of Adi, Galo, Apatani, Nyishi, Tagin, Hill Miri

<sup>15</sup> According to the Tani mythology, *Abo Tani* is the first human and the progenitor of the Tani people.

would be more proper to consider shamanism as a compilation of Tani cultural factors rather than as a religion.

Among Tani people, the institution of Shamanism is not hereditary. They believe that there are certain symptoms which a person goes through as a child which indicates his destined role in the society as a shaman. It has been observed that there will be many symptoms or signs which will indicate his becoming a shaman. In many cases there will be indications through dreams or entering into frequent trance as a child. The Tani people believe that a person who is destined to be a shaman has to go through a serious disease or a series of misfortunes without any obvious reason.

The Adis believe that those who are destined to become *Miri* (shaman) falls into trance in childhood they have the special talent for foretelling things. Among the Tani group which comprises of Adi, Galo, Apatani, Nyishi, Tagin, Hill Miri the institution of Shamanism is popular and indispensable.

Tani group consists of tribes like Adi, Galo, Apatani, Nyishi, Tagin, Hill Miri who trace their origin to the legendary figure *Abo Tani* and believe in Donyi-Polo or Danyi-Pilo (The Sun and Moon) as their supreme deity. They believe that like the two eyes of the Universe, both the Sun and the Moon always keep watchful eyes on the daily activities of the humans, therefore, human should refrain from wrongdoings or harmful activities. The nearest equivalent term for God used by the Tani people is Donyi-Polo. *Tani* literally means “human”.



Fig 3: Modern Representation of *Abo Tani* at *Gangi, Basar*



Fig 4: Modern Representation of *Donyi-Polo*.

Shamanism is an important part of Donyi-Polo faith. Shamans are a class of professional religious and intellectual men and women in Tani society. Apart from the Sun and Moon, Tani people also believe in a host of sylvan deities who are the guardian spirit of mountains, hills, forests, rivers, inside and outside village. They believe that every living or non-living entity has a guardian spirit. These spirits in general are called *Uyi*. These *Uyi* live in the forest, on huge trees (*hirek* or banyan tree), rivers, streams, caves, rocks, creeks, gorges etc. These spirits have huge influence in the life of the people as the people are depended on nature for their day to day needs and venture into the forest whenever there is a need. *Uyi* is frequently mentioned along with *Urom* (ghost of the ancestors). It is believed that they belong to the same realm. *Urom* is always considered as malevolent causing harm whereas *Uyi* can be both malevolent as well as benevolent. Donyi-Polo regarded as Supreme God, on the other hand is benevolent and cares for humankind.

The *Uyi*, both benevolent and malevolent are endowed with certain powers and they use this power to cause happiness or miseries in the lives of human. The malevolent spirits use these powers to cause harm to human in the form of diseases (fever, stomach ache, dysentery etc), miseries and misfortunes if they are displeased. Apart from causing sickness or adversely affecting health, they can also cause plague and destroy standing crops by excess rain or attack by pests and insects. On the other hand, benevolent spirits grant prosperity and abundance in terms of grains by ensuring good harvest and also by increasing livestock.





Fig 5: *Uyi* altars installed in an agricultural field at Basar



Fig 6: Ritual Altars

For example, *Dojang* and *Yapam* are the malevolent spirits among the Nyishi responsible of causing great harm to individuals whereas *Mopin*, *Ampir*, *Pvkaa* are benevolent spirits of the Galo people.

The Tani people have been living in close proximity with nature since time immemorial. For majority of the population, swidden cultivation, hunting, gathering and fishing is still their main mode of subsistence. Most of their daily needs are fulfilled from the forest resources. Therefore, nature is central to the culture of Tani people. They believe that it is important to maintain a cordial relation with the *Uyi* by giving them appropriate offerings. Before setting out for clearing the forest for slash and burn, venturing out for hunting or fishing in the forests and rivers for collecting food supplies, one has to be careful not to disturb or upset the guardian spirits who preside over the mountains, forests and the rivers. Therefore, the spirits need to be propitiated well through offerings in the form of animals, fowls, eggs etc. for using the resources that people are taking away from the forest or rivers. Therefore, people are always in touch and contact with the spirits on a regular basis. Both the malevolent and benevolent need to be offered sacrifices; the benevolent ones to obtain their blessings and the malevolent ones need to be appeased. To get connected with these spirits the Tani people need an intermediary, a mediator who will establish this contact between them or who would contact the spirits on their behalf and do the needful.





Fig 7: *Mopin* Altars at Chili village, Leparada District.



Fig 8: *Hor Yapom* Altars at Bam village, Leparada District.

Shamans in Tani society are of different categories. Some can perform only minor domestic rituals while the well experienced shaman can perform certain rituals of complex nature like *Nyigre* ritual among the Galo tribe which needs expertise and more power to deal with the spirits.

### **Role of the Shaman:**

The shamans have important function in clan-life of different tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. In Arunachal Pradesh among different tribes, Shaman is mostly seen as a diviner, communicator, negotiator, healer, ritual specialist, and religious expert but neither as a magician nor a mystic. S/he is the middleman between human and spirits who can communicate with the spirits on their behalf. As Tani people believe in the existence of spirits, they need human specialists, a shaman, who have experience and can get access to the spirit world as a communicator. Each clan has important religious specialists who initiate and foster contact with the spirits and divinities. They will contact the spirits and convey the messages between human and spirits. They have the power to call the spirits for blessings, support and protection against evil. They also have the power to enter into the spirit world and to communicate and negotiate with them that cause people to become sick. They enter into a dialogue with the spirits and ask for prosperity and health of the members of the clan.

As observed by Chaudhuri and Duarah<sup>16</sup> he is the mouthpiece of the people to communicate their grievances and sufferings to the spirits for redress.

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<sup>16</sup> Somesh Chaudhury and D.K Duarah,2004, 22.

Thus, he is regarded as the intermediary between the spiritual world and the human world.

Shamans are also the store house of traditional knowledge in the form of legends, myths, ritual incantations etc. They are well versed in ritual performances and knowledge and wisdom associated with it.

### **As communicator, mediator or negotiator:**

The conception of mediator comes clear with this assertion by Merete Jakobsen<sup>17</sup> that “although the concept (of shamanism) derives from the Tungus of Siberia, the role of the shaman as a mediator between the human world and the world of the spirits is known worldwide and therefore justifies the use of shamanism as a more general term”. The function of shamans for conducting communication between the earthly and heavenly worlds is found in the shamanisms of other countries too. Among many other abilities of the shamans that shamans are believed to have the power to ‘communicate’ with the other world inhabited by spirits. It is possible for shamans to see, talk and deliver a wish directly to souls belonging to the other world. They can also be called messengers for the other world. The shaman or shamaness communicate with the spirits perform ritual, celebrate sacrifice, cure sickness and disease. They negotiate with the spirits to restore the health of the person in exchange of any other animals. On the appointed day of the ritual, as per the negotiation, animals are sacrificed. The most

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<sup>17</sup> Jakobsen 1999, 1.

commonly animal or item for sacrifice is pig, rooster or hen, egg, cow and *Mithun*.

### **As Diviner:**

Through several mediums like egg and chick liver examination, divination is conducted by the shaman. On the basis of “signs” received from the spirit world, the shaman proceeds with the ritual accordingly.

### **Popular Divination Methods:**

It is believed that shaman has to establish contact with the spirits through the medium of divination. It is through this medium that the spirits send “signs” which the shaman reads. Popular divination method is done through:

1. *Roo-kognam* (chick liver examination)
2. *Pip-chinam* (examination through egg by ritual chanting)
3. *Lime kaanam* (examination through rice (uncooked) and pebbles)

### ***Roo kognam* (chicken liver examination):**

For conducting *roo kognam*, the shaman goes to the house of the sick person. He sits in a quiet and comfortable place and starts chanting holding a live chick in his hand. The chick is the medium through which communication is conducted. Through his chanting he tries to contact the spirits who in return send ‘signs’ through the medium. When chanting is over, the chick is cut open and the liver is examined to read the ‘signs’. The

signs are read by the shaman and also by other elders present in the house who are expert in reading and deciphering the signs.

***Pip chinam* (divination through eggs)**

This is another method of examination in which divination is done through examining egg yolk. The shaman holds raw (local) egg in his hands and starts chanting and in between gently blows the egg. Through chanting, shaman invokes the spirits to provide him the signs through the medium of egg. After incantations are over, he puts the egg in a container with water and put it on fire to boil. When the water boils to its full, with the help of tongs the egg is taken out. The shaman takes the boiled egg outside in the day light and peels the egg and cut in into two equal halves and then examines the yolk. Other elders present also examine the eggs for any possible signs. If there are no clear signs, more eggs are boiled to check for clearer signs. This goes on until the signs are clearly read and understood by the shamans.

***Lime kaanam:* (examination through rice (uncooked) and pebbles)**

In this type of divination, either rice (uncooked) or pebbles are used. Through chanting, shaman invokes the spirits and asks them specific question, like the cause of the sickness and how it can be cured. Through the arrangement of the rice or pebbles, shaman reads the signs of the spirits and communicates to the people on whose request he conducted the divination.

Through these divinations, contact/communication is established with the spirits and the message sent by them is 'read' and understood by the shaman. The cause of sickness, identification of the concerned spirit and the kind of animals to be sacrificed is communicated to the family. After discussion with the family members, the shaman performs *ambin baanam* in which s/he shaman enters into further dialogue with the spirits through incantations and finalizes the deal regarding the sacrifice of animals in exchange for restoring the health of the sick person. Shamanic practices include slaughtering livestock at home.

### **As traditional healer:**

Shaman conducts ritual to pacify the spirits that cause the diseases. They wielded the skill to cure disease or drive out evil spirits who targeted a person in trouble. As a healer, he restores health back to the sick person. They also retrieve lost souls or expel a spirit that causes disease. If any member in the family is afflicted with any kind of sickness, family seek the help of shaman in finding out the cause and restoring back the health of the concerned sick family member. Immediately the shaman conducts divination to confirm if the sickness is actually caused by any spirit. Once it is established as the work of spirit, the shaman needs to identify the particular spirit or spirits and the cause of the sickness and what it wishes in exchange for restoring the health back. To get all these information, shaman uses different mediums to contact the spirits through divination. As per the instructions received from the spirit, ritual is performed, sacrifices are

offered. A large number of people still go to shaman for healing if they do not get cured from medicines.

### **As Ritual Expert and Performer:**

They perform all the important rituals minor or major of the community. They conduct all kinds of rituals related to- rites of passage (birth, marriage death), agricultural, hunting, fishing, health and sickness. Through shaman, people try their best to appease deities and spirits so that no harm is done to them and in return the spirits bestow blessings upon them and protect them from all forms of natural calamities and sickness.

As mentioned earlier, the spirits can cause diseases, miseries, misfortunes and sometimes even death in extreme cases. The Galos believe that some illnesses are caused as a result of the soul straying away from the body or taken away by a certain spirit called *Yapom*. This same belief is also found among other Tani group and also among the Nepalese<sup>18</sup>. They believe that when a person is ill or sick, the person's soul is lost or strayed somewhere and is not able to find its way back and is in danger of being attacked by the evil spirits. This is a serious situation because absence of soul from body is a serious concern because it can cause sickness and if the soul doesn't return on time, the person's health can deteriorate gradually and the person may die if the soul wanders far away and lost his way to return back. The same kind of belief is also found among the Hmong as observed by Quincy<sup>19</sup>. He mentioned that "among Hmong a lost soul is a serious matter because

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<sup>18</sup> John T. Hitchcock, 1967.

<sup>19</sup> Quincy, 1995.

absence of soul from the body causes illness and if the soul is not returned to the body, the person will get worse and die". In his study of the Hmong, Cha<sup>20</sup> observed that Hmong believe that the shaman has the power to search for the lost, wandering or attacked soul and bring it back to the body in the world of reality.

Propitiating and invoking the deities or spirits is done through prayers, rituals and offerings of animal.

On the appointed day, the *Xibo*, shaman, with his assistant known as *Bow* among the Galo people along with the village people gather in the house of the sick family. Some village or clan members come before the arrival of the *Xibo* and *bow* to prepare the ritual altars. The ritual altars are made of raw bamboo shavings and certain species of leaves. These altars represent different spirits. The shaman decides the place where the altars are to be erected depending on the nature of the ritual. For certain ritual, the altars are kept inside the house, for some, the altars are erected inside the compound of the house and for some rituals, the altars are erected in the forest and the sacrifices are also done in the forest.

For rituals regarding prosperity and good luck, a clean place is chosen near the compound of the house or sometimes in the agricultural field where the altars are installed. The shaman and *bow* start their chanting from the house and continues it in front of the altars. During any ritual, the shaman recites the oral ritualistic chants. The chanting is called *Uyi benam*.

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<sup>20</sup>Cha, 2003.



Through chanting, shaman invokes the concerned spirits to come and accept the offerings given to them in the form of the sacrificed animals. It is believed that if the spirits are happy with the animals sacrificed, they release the *yalo*, soul and the person slowly get well. After the performance of the ritual, one or few beads in a thread is tied around the neck of the sick person. This is to ensure quick recovery of the person. On the other hand, after the performance of the ritual and sacrifices offered if the sickness continues, it is believed that it is because they forgot to offer sacrifice to certain spirits.

In such cases, the shaman has to perform the ritual again for that particular spirit and due sacrifice is offered. During the whole process of the ritual, the role of the shaman is of utmost importance because he acts as the mediator and communicator between the two worlds-human and spirit. In case of rituals related with sickness due to straying away of soul from body, shaman goes into deep trance and during his séance, looks for the soul and also finds the concerned spirit who caused this to happen. He enters into a dialogue with the spirit and finds out what it would like to have in exchange for the safely returning the soul of the person. Once the deal is finalized with the spirit, the shaman informs the family members what kind of animals and in what numbers have to be sacrificed in return for the soul of the person.



Fig 9: Sacrifices being offered to the *Uyi* (spirits)



Fig 10: The *Nyibo* and *Bow*



Fig 11: Beads for healing

For the performance of more complex rituals like *Nyigre*, *Mopin* and *Pvkaa* more experienced shamans of higher class are required. Not all shamans can perform such complex rituals. Among the Tani people, they believe that the institution of shamanism is neither hereditary nor by appointment. Nobody can choose to become a shaman, it is already decided in the womb of the mother, by the spirits, to be destined to become a shaman. The Adis also believe that shaman is born, cannot be made.

The shaman of the Tani society leads a very normal life like any other villagers. They are mostly farmers like other people from the village. During the performance of rituals, they skip their regular daily work in the field and perform the ritual. They are handsomely paid after the performance of rituals. The fee usually depends on the nature of the ritual and the type of sacrifices made. In earlier times, the priest was usually offered the best portion of the meat of the sacrificed animals and valuable brass metal objects but along with that these days cash are also being used. Throughout the ritual period, the household takes good care of the shaman and offers him sumptuous food accompanied by local alcohol and also foreign liquor.

Regarding shamanism, there is no formal institution or training centres where one can learn the knowledge of the spirit world or practice like any other professions. However, for *Boo* who are the assistant of the shaman usually learn most of the things from observations. Many who are interested in ritual activities can learn bits and pieces through their participation in various rituals. They do not need to be an accomplished shaman but can accompany the shaman in ritual chanting. By learning and practicing one can go to certain extent but cannot master the craft completely and therefore cannot perform rituals where entering into trance is necessary. Only an accomplished skilled shaman who is born with the gift can enter into trance, go to the spirit world and return back unscathed.

## **Trance during Ritualistic Performance:**

Trance during the performance of any ritual is regarded as "ecstatic experience" that is related with shamanism. Therefore, Shaman is regarded as master of ecstasy.

It is believed that during specialized trance the soul of the shaman is believed to leave his body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld to get in touch with the spirits. Trance is mandatory for certain specialized ritual among the tribes in Arunachal Pradesh though entering trance is not compulsory for every ritual. The best example of trance during ritual is during the *Xigre* ritual of the Galo tribe.

### ***Xigre Xibo (Nyigre Nyibo)***

The concept of *Xigre Xibo* is popular among the Galos and the Adis. These shamans are regarded as of the highest level that can perform complex ritual. It is an age-old tradition which developed from animistic beliefs and shamanistic activity. Healing is the ostensible purpose of *xigre*, a shamanic ceremony of the Galo people. The *xigre* ritual serves both as an occasion for healing and as an arena for shamans to establish themselves as influential "men of prowess" for their local communities. This ritual performance is combined with healing ceremonies and trance sessions to establish contact with spirits. During the performance the shaman speaking in a strange voice, predicting the future from natural omens and so on.





Fig 12: Xibo, Migo Bam in unconscious state after trance, Bam village during *Moopin*.

The opening and closing rituals are integral aspects of *Xigre* performances to invoke spiritual cooperation and protection.

The shaman enters in trance for the following reasons: curing, healing, divination, or accompanying the dead to the world of the supernatural; but the meaning is always the same-the connection of the shaman to a world not readily accessible to ordinary human beings through an abnormal psychic state, the trance. The ecstatic experience is intimately connected with a vivid belief in the "afterlife" or the "other world" of spirits, where the shaman travels during his trance. One of the main arguments regarding the universal conceptualization of shamanism is the notion of ecstasy and trance, which represents the basic function of shamans. However, trance or possession by a spirit is not an essential prerequisite of shamanic rituals. In many rituals performed by the Tani group, trance is not the ultimate goal and the shamans do not enter into trance like state. This shows that the experience of trance does not always accompany shamanic rituals. Tani people believe that trance is a way to lead shamans to a state that enables them to contact souls and spirits.

During the performance of *Xigre*, trance is an essential requisite for the shaman. He goes into complete trance and many informed that the shaman is possessed by the spirit. Being under trance or possessed by spirit, the shaman starts to behave, dance and sometimes they also lose consciousness. During the performance of *Xigre* ritual, the shaman is usually draped in a female traditional wraparound skirt called *galey*. While in trance, he possesses extreme energy and does many unthinkable feats like putting the

hot charcoal embers inside his mouth or even walking on the sharp edge of the machete. However, after returning back to normalcy the shaman doesn't remember anything of the thing that he did during the trance. Over the generations the art and ritual of *Xigre* has thrived in Galo villages.

In the present time, there are very few and limited occasions to observe *Xigre* ritual because the number of such accomplished shaman are very few and they are in their late 80's. Despite its significance in the religious sphere of the Galos, this practice and performance is rapidly declining.



## CHAPTER 3

### **Shamanism among the Tani group (Galo, Tagin, Adi, Nyishi)**

Among the Tani group, shaman is popularly known as *Nyibo* or *Nyibu*. The Galo and Tagin call the shaman as *Xibo* (*Nyibo*), Adi call *Nyibu* or *Miri*, Nyishi and Apatani also call as *Nyibu*.

The Galo are the inhabitants of newly created Leparada and Lower Siang districts. They have a unique and different cultural system than most tribes in Arunachal Pradesh. A significant part of the Galo cultural system is shamanism which represents a model for cultural identity and well-being for most Galo people with the exception of those who practice religious beliefs such as Christianity and Buddhism. Among the Galo, the shamans are not necessarily seen as medicine men/ women. Among them, healing is and always has been the main work of the shaman. Shaman is believed to have possess /acquire certain power when he is in trance. The power of the shaman is not physical power but rather a spiritual one. The Galo shaman doesn't wear specialized shamanic dress like that of the Apatani shaman for the performance of rituals. For the performance of minor ritual, the Galo shaman wears his usual clothes except for the string of beads.



Fig 13: *Xibo Migo Bam* during *Moopin* ritual 2018.



Fig 13: *Xibo Migo Bam* during *Mopin* ritual 2018.



Fig14: *Xibo* Bam (needs assistance due to old age)



Fig 15: *Xibo* Tabi Bam during *Jed Mod* ritual, Basar.





Fig 16: *Xibo and Bow* chanting during ritual



Fig 17: *Xibo Tabi Bam*, Bam Village, Leparada District.



a.



b.

Fig 18 a,b : *Moopin Xibo*

Among Adi, the inhabitants of East Siang district, shaman is known as *Miri*. Apart from the major *Solung* ritual, *Miri* also performs all the domestic as well as communal rituals. During the performance of important rituals, the *Miri* puts on female attire. The function of an Adi shaman is similar to that of Galo shaman.

The Tagin tribe are mostly found in the Upper Subansiri District of Arunachal Pradesh. Among the Tagin, the shaman is known as *Nyibu* and their belief system is similar to that of the Galo. As observed by Riddi<sup>21</sup>, “In the Tagin society, the *nyibu* is one who can perform rites and rituals without fixed date and place, diagnosed the nature of illness, identify the type of spirits responsible for illness and misfortune in the family or clan and determine kind of sacrifice to be offered to conciliate the spirits through divination or witchcraft and, insist on the spirits to accept the animals, fowls and egg in place of *Yiji-Yal* (soul) of the sick men. In normal times, he invokes the blessing of benevolent deities by sacrificing on behalf of the family and people”.

Among the Tagins also the institution of shamanism is not hereditary and even women can become shaman. According to Riddi<sup>22</sup> there are different categories of Tagin *Nyibu*:

1. *Nyikri-Tago-Nyibu*: They are the highest class of shaman who can go into trance and connect with the spirits.

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<sup>21</sup> Ashan Riddi, 2008,137.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 140.





Fig 19: Tagin shaman with wife and child (Photo Courtesy Lovely Arunachal)

2. *Buchi/ Bhumi Nyibu*: They heal sick people by performing rituals but on a smaller scale.
3. *Bute/ Buru Nyibu*: They are shaman of highest order who can perform rituals after diagnosing the disease and offer sacrifices on both larger and smaller scale.
4. *Nikiok*: They aren't shaman in real sense as they cannot perform any ritual but they can read the omen through mediums like chicken liver and eggs.

This categorization clearly shows that the Tagin shamans are of different classes and their role and power is important criteria in grading them. Like the Galos, the Tagin *Nyibu* also conducts divination through chicken liver and egg yolk. At the time of the performance of ritual, the Tagin *Nyibu* uses *Geli-Talaf*<sup>23</sup>, *Sibo-Riokse*<sup>24</sup> as a part of his sacred items.

### **Shamanism among the Nyishi Tribe:**

The Nyishi/Nyshing is one of the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, inhabiting East Kameng, Papum Pare, Lower Subansiri, Kurung Kumey, and Upper Subansiri districts of Arunachal Pradesh. They are traditionally shifting cultivators and grow rice, maize and millet in their *jhum* fields. They regard the Sun as their supreme deity called as *Ane Donyi*. They also believed in the existence of spirits called *Uyu/Ui*. *Ui* is one of the malevolent and fearful spirits that the Nyishi believe in and most of their religious activities centre around him.

Among the Nyishi there are three categories of shaman<sup>25</sup>:

1. *Nijik Nube*: this class of shaman only treat ordinary diseases and observes omens in the egg or chicken.
2. *But Nube*: this class of shamans are few in number and are the most competent and distinguished priests. They perform sacrifices and cure illnesses.

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<sup>23</sup> Long fan made of the tail of eagle.

<sup>24</sup> Tibetan sword

<sup>25</sup> For details see Betty Laloo, 2011, 23



3. *Nyoki Nube*: they serve as mediators between the people and the *uyu*.

The role of shaman in Nyishi society is very crucial. They are invited by families during occasions like birth, marriage, death and also for domestic as well as community ritual. All the important festivals and rituals are performed by the shaman. The important festivals of the Nyishi like *Nyokum* and *Lungte Yullo*, have many important series of rituals which can only be performed by an expert shaman. Apart from these major festivals, the role of shaman is crucial to perform important community festivals related to harvesting. Shaman plays a very important role in the performance of all these rituals. During earlier days most of the rituals weren't performed on annual basis; they were observed only when there were strong signs from the spirits as understood by the shaman however in the modern times, these rituals are celebrated as annual festivals. It is the shaman who fixes the day and month of the celebration after conducting divination.

### **Nyokum Yullo celebration:**

Earlier *Nyokum* was celebrated by an individual family but later on the ritual is performed on a grander scale as a community festival involving the whole or clan. The *Nyibu* through divination decides on a day for the performance of the festival. On the appointed day the whole community comes to a specified place usually an open space or centre of the village or the village community hall for the celebration. Ritual altars made of raw

bamboo and certain species of leaves are erected and sacrifices consist of animals and fowls are made to the concerned spirits.

Like the Galo and Adi divinations, the Nyishi *Nyibu* also conducts divinations to fix the day and month of the ritual to be performed. The numbers of animal to be sacrificed are all decided by observing omens with the aid of chicken liver and egg yolk.

Dr Duarah<sup>26</sup> noted that on the day of the ritual, aided by other priests, the shaman performs the *Nyokum* ritual by chanting mythical hymns, *Yallo-Barnam* in their shamanic dialect, and the chanting continue for two nights and a day. These are long hymn which narrate the legends about how they originated from Abotani, their ancestral father and the difficulties they faced during their journey from the evil spirits and how the deities helped them to overcome the difficulties and finally helped them to settle.

After the recitation of the hymns is over, the shaman and *buu* stands in front of the ritual altar that has been erected and through incantations invite different deities to come and accept the offerings. After the sacrifice, the ritual comes to an end and the shaman and his assistants are fed well by the participants with rice, meat and *opo*. As noted by Bengia<sup>27</sup>, during *Nyokum*, the shaman chants *Pakhyi* hymn<sup>28</sup>, *Nyoyin* hymn<sup>29</sup> and *Duggur* hymns which are central to *Nyokum* celebration.

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<sup>26</sup>Duarah, Traditional Customs and Rituals Connected with the agricultural festivals of the Nishing, 171.

<sup>27</sup>Bengia, The *Nyokum* Celebration, Its Origin and Related Ritual, 138.

<sup>28</sup> This hymn is dedicated to different *Uyi* like *Bull taby*, *Churr Muchu*, *KiunLuchu* etc. who rule the forest to bless human beings for better harvest.

Like *Nyokum*, *Lungte Yullo* is another major ceremony of the Nyishi in which shaman also plays an important role.



Fig.20. Shamaness of the Monal Clan (Photo Courtesy Dahey Sangno)

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<sup>29</sup>In this hymn, the shaman invokes *Geth Ath* and *IshAiyi* to accept the offerings brought by the people and bless them abundantly.



Fig 21: Shamaness of the Monal Clan, Yadang (Photo Courtesy Dahey Sangno)

## **Shamanism among the Apatani:**

The practice of Shamanism is popular among the Apatani tribe of Lower Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh. Among the Apatanis, the shaman is known as *Nyibu*. According to Hage Naku<sup>30</sup> regarding the origin of the institution of *Nyibu*, *Kolyung* and *Kolo*, the sacred verses of Apatani reveal that the malevolent spirits like *Giri*, *Hiiri*, *Gyopu*, *Taisime*, *Milya* and *Dopung* existed before the creation of Universe and they asked *Hiiri* to obstruct the creation of the Earth and Sky. Therefore, *Kolyung Bumya Nyikang* was born out of *Tangu Nguntii Anii*, a goddess to propitiate the spirits and help in the creation of the Earth and the Sky. Accordingly, *Kolyung Bumya Nyikang* propitiated the concerned spirit with the relevant incantations and sacrifices and as a result of which the Earth and the Sky came into existence.

Among Apatani, the role of shaman is highly crucial. Like other tribes, among the Apatanis, the position of *Nyibu* is not hereditary and not exclusive to men. The Apatanis believe that the first shaman was a female named *Dolyañ Chanjañ*, *Abo Tani*'s sister. They also believe that people who become shaman were blessed by *Ato Charung* and *Jolo Lyayu*. Apatani society is divided in *Gyuchi* and *Gyutti*, however there is no restriction as people from any section can become shaman. The Apatani *Nyibu* also conducts divinations *Yalang Binii* and *Papu Pinii* in order to connect with

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<sup>30</sup> Hage Naku, Sacred Specialists of Arunachal Pradesh –A case study of the Apa Tanis, 158.

the spirits. The Apatani shaman is well versed in the oral literatures, *Miji*<sup>31</sup> and *Migun*<sup>32</sup>.

It is believed those who are destined to become shaman take keen interest in the learning of traditional knowledge of the shamans. There are shamans of different grading in Apatani society. Not every shaman can become Myoko Shaman. The shaman of highest order only performs the Myoko or Muruñ rituals. These rituals are performed only by the well-known, well-experienced established shamans. Omens are tested again and again to ascertain before choosing the Myoko priest. Names of the well-known established shamans from different clans and villages are put together; omens are tested against their names and the omens give an indication as who should be chosen as the Myoko Nyibu.

The Myoko Nyibu commands respect not only from his immediate clan members but also from the whole Apatani tribe because it is a highly respectable assignment. To become a Myoko Nyibu is a matter of great respect and achievement one's life because one is always remembered as Myoko shaman even after his/her death. After the successful completion of the Myoko rituals, The Nyibu is an established name in the valley. He also leads the *Penü*<sup>33</sup> during Muruñ festival. As remuneration for the service provided by the priest they are paid in kind and cash.

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<sup>31</sup> *Miji* is a set of oral ritual narratives.

<sup>32</sup> *Migun* is a set of oral literature related with the historical accounts

<sup>33</sup> Ceremonial procession during important ritual.





Fig 22: Apatani shaman leading the *Penü* during *Muruñ* festival



Fig 23: Shaman's performance during *Nago* ritual



a.



b.

Fig 24 a,b : Apatani shaman chanting before the sacrifice of the pigs during Myoko festival





Fig 25: An old Apatani Ritual Altars

In earlier times, when the circulation of cash was limited, the priests were given certain amount of unhusked rice, best portion of the sacrificed meat, tobacco, brass plates and *dao* (machete) etc. After performing rituals, the shaman gets the best portion of the animal that is sacrificed during the ritual. At the time of *Myoko*, *Muruñ*, *Subu*, they get bigger remuneration for the service rendered. Many communities in Arunachal Pradesh still practice the same tradition however now a day payment in cash and gifting of alcohol is the most accepted norm.

The Myoko festival continues for a whole month and it is full of series of rituals such as which involve continues invocations and chanting.

Therefore, the chosen shaman must have full and accurate knowledge of Myoko related myths and legends. Even a microscopic mistake can displease the spirits which can be disastrous for the whole clan. Because there are historical instances of the occurrence of plague, epidemic devastations caused by the spirits when the shaman made mistakes during performing the ritual or failed to please the spirits.

During the performance of the rituals, the Nyibu is assisted by an assistant called *bo*. The assistants are also well versed in myths and legends but not as skilled as the *Nyibu*. They accompany the Nyibu in providing chorus to their chanting during the performance of the ritual.

The Apatani shaman believe that at the time of the performance of important ritual, the shaman must be in complete shamanic attire otherwise the ritual will not be successful and it can bring misfortune for the whole village. Therefore, during Myoko, Murun and Subu rituals, the shamans are decked in their shamanic dress during the rituals and through their invocations they invite the spirits and apprise them how they are dressed in full shamanic dress holding their sacred items waiting to receive them.

Now most of the established seasoned Myoko Nyibu's are in their late seventies or eighties. Chaudhuri<sup>34</sup> observed that, "In the context of Arunachal Pradesh, which is an excellent example of religious syncretism, shamanism still plays a very important role among most non-Buddhist tribes

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<sup>34</sup>Chaudhuri, "Plight of the Igu: notes on shamanism among the Idu Mishmis of Arunachal Pradesh, India", 32.

even though Christianity is gradually becoming a dominant reality in this Indian frontier region.”

## **Shamanism among the Buddhist Communities: (Monpa, Sherdukpen Memba, Khamba, Khamti and Singhpo)**

As per Census 2011, Arunachal Pradesh has 11.77% of Buddhist population. The major Buddhist tribes in Arunachal Pradesh are Monpa, Sherdukpen, Memba, Khamba, Khamti and Singhpo.

The Monpa and Sherdukpen have traditional Buddhist *Lamas* as their religious head. But they also have indigenous priest known as *Bun* or *Phramein* and besides them there are shamans known as *Yu-Min* who can contact spirits and prophesize while in trance. Among the Sherdukpen, the priest is known as *Jiji* who can establish contact with the spirits.

Khamti and Singhpo are Theravada Buddhist practitioners and they have Buddhist priest known as *Chow-Mum* and *Punguya* however there are also indigenous priest known as *Chere* and *Dumsa*.

Despite Buddhist religious priests who hold an important position in the religious function of the Buddhist communities, the presence of indigenous priest is a strong suggestion of their belief in the institution of shamanism.

## **Shamanism among other tribes:**

### **Shamanism Among Wancho**

The Wancho people mostly inhabit the Longding district of Arunachal Pradesh. Like other tribes, they are also traditionally agriculturalists, hunters and gatherers. They believe in *Jowan-Rang* and *Baurang* as the Supreme beings. Rang is the God of Heaven or Sky. He is a benevolent God. Baurang is the God of the Earth and is a malevolent spirit. He is also a destroyer.

The position of shaman is that of highly respected in Wancho society. The priest is known as *Gampa/ Jampa/ Rammi/ Gipa*. According to Naphung Wangsa<sup>35</sup>, there can be any number of Gampas in a village for different activities, but only one person will be the head priest called *Noknu-Gampa* who tackles the major activities of the village. The priest plays an active role in the performance of rituals and offering sacrifices at the time of ritual. The Wancho shaman plays an important role in the performance of rites of passage-birth, death, health etc.

### **Birth related rituals:**

At the time of the birth of a child, a ritual known as *gansha* is performed by a female *gamnu* in which the family members along with other elderly womenfolk of the village participate and decide a name for the baby. This

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<sup>35</sup> Wangsa, *Rites and Rituals of the Wanchos*, 24.

ritual is followed by *kanju*<sup>36</sup>, *juthem*<sup>37</sup> in which appropriate offerings are made by the *gamnu* to seek blessings and luck for the new born baby. Minor rituals are performed by the *gamnu* and do not necessarily need the service of an expert shaman.

**Health related** major rituals like *Kakten*<sup>38</sup> is performed by the *Noknu-Gampa*.

### **Death related rituals:**

Ritual related with death of common people<sup>39</sup> is performed by any ordinary priest. Through incantations and invocations, the priest calls upon the God of Death, *Jumpu* to take care of the soul of the dead person. However, the death rituals of king or queen of Wancho clan are performed by *Noknu Gampa*.

### **Rituals related with agriculture:**

The Wancho shaman also performs series of agricultural rites beginning from clearing forest till the harvest is brought home, priest plays an important role. Before clearing forest for cultivation, priest goes to the chosen patch of land and pray to the land (spirits owning the land) and offer eggs and offerings.

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<sup>36</sup> A ritual in which the mouth of child is symbolically touched with rice, piece of meat and *ju* (rice beer).

<sup>37</sup> A ritual to seek blessings for the new born child and also acknowledging the help from *Gamnu* during the entire process.

<sup>38</sup> *Kakten* is a ritual performed to protect the village from the epidemic.

<sup>39</sup> Wancho society is divided into Wangham (chiefly clan), Wangcha, Wangsus and Wangpan (commoner)

The most important festival of the Wanchos *Oriah* cannot be complete without the important presence of the priest. It is the priest who makes the images of the deities. Only the *Gampa* has the right to make the images of *Janggan Pa*<sup>40</sup>, *Janggan Nu*<sup>41</sup> and *Janggan Sa*<sup>42</sup>. On behalf of the people, the *Gampa* prays to the deities for good harvest.

### **Shamanism among Mishmi:**

The Mishmis are inhabitants of Dibang Valley and Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh. Among the Idu Mishmi, the shaman is called *Igu*. The *Igu* occupies a very prominent in the society due to the spiritual power they can get access to. Like other shamans, they can cure diseases and offers sacrifices. As observed by Prof. Chaudhuri<sup>43</sup> , “Traditionally, an *Igu* represents the central icon in the arena of religious beliefs and practices in Idu society. Almost every major aspect of Idu life revolves around their *Igus* and its importance is reflected even beyond the sacred boundary, since they are involved in profane activities. For them, the key concept of spirit (*khinyu*) rules the world of the unknown, which may be benevolent or malevolent, while nourishing the concept of a Supreme Creator known as *Inni*.

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<sup>40</sup> father

<sup>41</sup> mother

<sup>42</sup> son

<sup>43</sup> Sarit K. Chaudhuri. Plight of the igus: notes on shamanism among the Idu Mishmis of Arunachal Pradesh, India p 85.



Fig 26: Mishmi *Igu* (Photo Courtesy Arif Siddiqui)



It is the *Igu* or shaman who works as the mediator between the Idus and their world of the unknown by performing various rituals, magic religious acts and most importantly, by a unique dance assisted by some team members. The *Igu* has such pervasive influence in the whole social system that even today when their society is undergoing a transformation process most people still have a strong cognitive perception of the divine power of the *Igus*; an institution which has fallen into gradual decline”.

Mishmi *Igu* ritualistic dress is very elaborate. As observed by Pandey<sup>44</sup> “The *Igus* have the ceremonial attire which is worn to give him an awe-inspiring appearance and to make him competent to conformed spirit”.

The Mishmis believe that *Inni* gave birth to the priests. Apart from *Igu*, Pandey<sup>45</sup> mentions many other Mishmi priests variously called *Sineru*, *Lomo Asili Mili*, *Alunjure*, *Atoliru*, *Adijuri*, *Ato-Juru* (*Lomino Ajouru*) depending on the kind of ritual performed.

### **Shamanism among Tangsa:**

The Tangsa tribe are mainly found in the Changlang District of Arunachal Pradesh. The indigenous faith of Tangsa people is known as *Rangfraa*. For Tangsa people *Ranfraa* is equivalent to the term God.

According to study conducted by Chimoy Simai<sup>46</sup> among the Tikhak Tangsa, the shaman is known as *Tumsa Wa* and he conducts different ways

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<sup>44</sup>Pandey, *Spirits and Deities of Mishmis*, 131.

<sup>45</sup> Pandey, *Spirits and Deities of Mishmis*, 132.

<sup>46</sup> Simai, “A Profile of Tikhak Tangsa Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh”, 2008.

of *Walung Ta* (Omen) to find the cause of the sickness or discomfort. The role of *Tumsa Wa* is very important in Tangsa society.

### **Shamanism among Nocte:**

The Nocte are one of the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh and mainly found in the Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh. Majority of the Nocte have adopted Vaisnavism and Christianity, however there are still people who believe in the indigenous faith and believe in the existence of *Joban/Jongban* (God) and spirits both malevolent and benevolent. Among the Nocte, the indigenous ritual experts are known by different names *Taba*, *Nyamtai*, *Otai* and *Ngopa*.

Among other tribes also the institution of shamanism is prevalent. Among the Aka, shaman is known as *Mugou*. No ritual could be complete without the presence of a *Mugou*.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **Causes for decline of the Institution of Shamanism:**

Despite being an important part of the tribal religion, the institution of shamanism is declining. The traditional role of the shaman in the tribal society reduced considerably over years. Most of the shamans are in their late 80s and there are very few new young shamans. In many villages there are no surviving shamans, therefore, they invite or seek the service of shamans from others villages. There are many factors that are leading to the decline of the institution of shamanism in the tribal societies in Arunachal Pradesh.

Due to easy access to health care medical facilities, people go to health care centres which are there in most of the villages. People prefer to go to hospital and treated by the doctor rather than consulting a shaman when they are sick.

With the establishment of several educational institutions across the state, children spend much of their time in the schools. A considerable amount of time is spent in the school learning different subjects. In case of residential school, either within or outside the state, children spend much of their time outside the village and grow up in a completely alien culture as a result of

which the young generation grow without being aware of their traditional culture of which shamanism is an important part.

As the children spend less time with their family members and elders of the families, the contact become lesser and lesser and over time affect their understanding and respect for their traditions. There are many young Arunachalee children who have not even come across a shaman if they studied in residential school and lived in towns and cities. With the passing away of the old generation of shamans, there will not be anybody to continue with the tradition of shamanism.

With the high inflation rate, it is nearly impossible to meet the necessary costs regarding rituals which involve feeding large number of people and sacrificing considerable number of animals. Increase in prices have also affected the fees of shamans. In the recent years, the remuneration paid to the shaman has also increased. And there are fewer options to choose as there are already shortage of shamans. Along with the ever-increasing costs of the rituals, people from poor economic background find it difficult to meet the cost of hiring the services of shaman.

As mentioned above, there is shortage of shamans in the villages. At the time of Myoko and Muruñ, it is increasingly becoming difficult to find a shaman expert in the concerned rituals. Not all shamans have complete knowledge about the ritualistic chanting related with these festivals. Therefore, only Myoko shaman can perform Myoko ritual.

Conversion is also seen as one of the factors leading to the downfall of the institution of shamanism. In the recent years, the conversion rate is going higher as a result of which most of the tribal population in Arunachal Pradesh are converted to Christianity and more and more families are converting to Christianity with each passing year. After converting to Christianity, they completely discard anything to do with the tribal religion; they treat shamanism and all sorts of related thing with disdain because it is against Christianity. In many cases, indigenous priests themselves converted to Christianity. Many economically weak families are also converting because they cannot afford the costs of the rituals and the fees of the shaman.

A wrong concept is put into the minds of the people where the neo converts think that everything related to traditional animistic religion is satanic. They degrade tribal tradition and forces lay people to adhere to a Western lifestyle introduced from Christian countries, which is believed to be more rational and modernized.

### **The Role of Shaman in the modern society:**

The role of shaman in modern Arunachal society is changing over time. Their traditional duties as a diviner, healer, ritual performer in the village is diminishing. They have a very limited role to play in the modern times. With few exceptions, one of the important modern functions of the priest is to look after the daily activities of Gangi. With the religious reformation movement which is taking place in Arunachal Pradesh, in the form of

institutionalization of the Donyi-Polo Faith, *Gangi*, a prayer meeting place for the Donyi-Polo devotee is playing an important role. Every Sunday mass is held where devotees sing devotional songs and discourses are given by the priest who also looks after the functions of the *Gangi*. These priests can be anybody who has fair knowledge of the myths and legends of the community and not necessary a shaman.

In general, the studies of the shaman have never received a respectful and scientific attention by the scholars due to linguistic barrier. And those who are familiar with the language rarely think the intellectual life of a shaman worth transcribing. Therefore, we do not have any reports on the intellectual side of the shaman's activities.

## **Measures for the preservation of the Institution of Shamans**

In the context of Arunachal Pradesh, it is important to document the knowledge of the shamans because they will get lost with the passage of time. Many tribal people believe that modern way of life has diluted the traditional life for example in traditional society there used to be strict adherence followed by menstruating females which in many cases isn't followed with the same strictness in the modern times which has affected the institution of shamanism.

Dr. Kim (In Whoe Kim of Hanyang University) mentioned that Shaman heritage possesses humanistic, egalitarian, communitarian, communicational and reconcilable values and he highlighted that those values should be more disseminated through institutional education. The higher educational institutes in the State are also becoming increasingly aware of the importance of the tribal cultural heritage. Workshops are conducted by the Department of Arunachal Institute of Tribal Studies (AITS), Rajiv Gandhi University, Doimukh focusing on the intangible cultural heritage of the region which is reflected in the recently concluded workshop “Dialogue on Intangible Cultural Heriatge” where the Mishmi *Igus* were invited to participate and share their experiences along with the scholars. Giving space to shamans in academic discourses is the beginning of acknowledging their ancient wisdom and its relevance in the present time too.

Realizing the importance of shamanism which is an intrinsic part of tribal culture, there are attempts at different levels to revive this tradition of shamanism in Arunachal Pradesh. Seeing the plight of the shamans in the modern times, there is an association known as All Arunachal Pradesh Priest Welfare Association (AAPPWA) to look into the matter of the problems faced by the priests in the modern times and to promote the tradition of priest.

In 2018, Arunachal Pradesh opened its first Shamanic Centre known as “*Mipi Pene*<sup>47</sup> Center”. It is the State’s first shamanic center and was inaugurated by the Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh Shri Pema Khandu.

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<sup>47</sup> *Mipi Pene* means “the place for Shamans” in Mishmi language.



The idea of opening such a center was conceptualized by Rajya Sabha MP Mukut Mithi who himself belongs to Idu Mishmi tribe and an ardent advocator of indigenous faith. The Centre showcases the *Igu* heritage and culture of the Idu Mishmis. In this center the shaman can perform rituals and offer their priestly service. This has been done to meet the rising demands for shamans. This center also has a museum known as *Igu* Museum in which Shamanistic objects like costumes, ritual items, shamanic clothing and information of different types of rituals performed by the shaman are on display. The museum is an effort towards preserving the shamanic traditions of the Igu.



a



b.

Fig 27 a,b: *Mipi Pene* Center, Lower Dibang Valley District



a.



b.

Fig 28 a,b : Shamanic objects displayed at *Mipi Pene* Center, Lower Dibang Valley District

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