

## **Traditional Health Beliefs, Practices and Healers among the Kuki Tribe of Manipur**

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### **Introduction**

Every society irrespective of their ethnicity, geographical location, modernism and innovation has their own traditional medical beliefs and practices. Though western medical system is fast developing today, people still opted for traditional way of healing. This traditional beliefs and practices are mostly associated with the way the people diagnosed their illnesses and chose their healers according to their illnesses. When an illness first show its appearance, the victim or the family try to explain it in their own terms and through their experiences and beliefs they classified their illness to be natural or unnatural. All these beliefs and knowledge about the way they perceived their health is interwoven with their respective culture. E.B. Tylor (1871) definition on culture could be recollect where he defines culture as 'That complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of the society'. From this definition we learned that culture teaches oneself how to live within them; with the other culture and how to identify illnesses into natural and supernatural. As the culture of the world are different the beliefs and interpretations of a particular illness is also varies. The influence of culture in

their traditional beliefs and indigenous knowledge is still constant upon the people that they cannot fully accept the new advancement of western medical system. Looking into the whole health care system of the different cultures of the world, we find that there is combination of both the western medical system and the traditional way. People depend on the traditional healer at times of trouble mostly with psychological problems. This does not mean that western medical system is not satisfying the people desires, the dissatisfaction lies when the medicine given by the doctors could not give an interpretation of certain illness which are cause by black magic and witchcraft. According to Allan Young (1976:10), “The layman willingness to defer to the understanding of the specialists is possible only in societies where a significant amount of medical knowledge relating to serious sickness can be called esoteric (that is, the secret or privileged understanding of special people), and where the owners of esoteric knowledge are able to demonstrate their uncommon medical powers. The people opted between various medical systems depending on the way how their culture defines and explains that particular illness. The same kind of illness can be explained with different interpretation by different culture. The practice of depending on traditional healers is highly found among many tribal and rural people of India. Khare (1963) studied the medical beliefs of the people of the Indian villages and impact of this medical belief which is contrasting to the modern medicine. Opler’s (1963) studied the rural area of Uttar Pradesh in India saying that the medical beliefs are part of the values and thinking of the culture. It is true that all these beliefs and practices could not be ruled out from the lives of the people as it will always exist in their culture and there is continuity of this cycle which paves way for the new generation to continue with the traditional beliefs and practices.

## **Universe of study**

The Kukis are an ethnic group that scattered throughout the Northeastern region of India, Northwest Burma and Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh. In Northeast India they settled in all the seven states except in Arunachal Pradesh. The Kuki tribe is an amalgamation of different sub-tribe and numerous clans. These clans share a common past, culture, customs and tradition. They speak in dialects that have a common root language belonging to the Tibeto-Burman group. The Kukis have Mongoloid features and are generally short-stature with straight black hair and dark brown eyes. The different Kuki clans are recognized as scheduled tribe of India. This tribe recognition is based on the dialect spoken and region. In northeast they are most scattered in Manipur, Nagaland, Assam and Mizoram. Kukis is composed of many different clans and further divided into many sub-clans. The Kuki tribe has their own indigenous religion but an important breakthrough in the history of the Kuki people with extensive change in social, cultural and political effects is the arrival of missionaries and the spread of Christianity among the Kukis. The acceptance of Christianity marks a departure from their many tribal customs and traditions, and along with the spread of English education, the coming of modernity is seen within the Kuki people. The main occupation of this tribe is agriculture and horticulture but with the impact of western education many people are in government jobs. The present study is conducted among the Thadou speaking Kuki tribe of Manipur. This paper is based on all my field work experiences about the traditional health beliefs, practices and their approaches to traditional healers in three different districts of the Kukis. It is conducted in Sapormeina of Senapati district, Moreh an Indo-Burma border in Chandel district and Chassad Avenue in Imphal.

## **Methodology**

As the work is done on the traditional health beliefs and practices, the research requires doing an in-depth interview on the concept and experiences of the people regarding health and how they are still believing on their indigenous health care practices. An interview and case study is conducted among the traditional healers concerning the diagnosis and therapy they adopted. An observation is also done to witness the way the healers used in carrying out their treatment processes in order to see the satisfaction of the people.

## **Objectives**

The main objective is to explore on the existing traditional health beliefs and practices found among the Kuki tribe. It will also find the different type of traditional healers found among them and their way of diagnosis and therapy. It will further find out similarities between the Kuki tribe with other culture of the world in terms of traditional healing.

## **Concept of Health**

“Health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely an absence or infirmity” (WHO, 1948). But recently this statement has been enlarged to include the ability to lead a ‘socially and economically productive life’. So health covers a large domain of a person’s well-being and we can’t judge a person by only the physical well-being. Therefore, it has been always said “when health is well everything is well”. Every society has different concept of health. The Kuki tribe perceived themselves as healthy as long as they can work physically whether in the field or household, carrying out their daily routine and in good shape in outward appearance. Among this tribe, the perception for healthy person is that he should be

void of any deformities or illness apparently and psychologically. The local term for health is called '*damthei*' or '*tahsa pha*'. When a person is called *damthei*, he is tension free, physically active, mentally undisturbed and financially well off. Another perception is that good appetite is a sign of healthiness. Being a tribe, consumption of meat is extremely seen among the people and those who are not indulging in this practice are notified as unhealthy by the people. When the all these are missing in one's life he is term as sick and the local termed for sick is '*damlou*'. A sick person among them will always get deviant from work which is similar to the observation made by Talcott's Parson's (Alland 1970:16-17). The role play by the sick person is to get refrains from regular work and the intensity of his sickness is measured by the time the sick person is abstaining from his work. The family, relatives and the community play a major role in identifying and selecting of perfect therapists for the sick person. In their philosophy there are only two kinds of sickness exists; one is occurring naturally by seasonal change or poor diet or environment or weak immune system and the other is cause by some powerful supernatural agents. From the signs and symptoms of the sick person, they will categorize the illness to be cause by natural or supernatural power.

## **Beliefs and Practices**

The health beliefs and practices of the Kuki tribe are interlinked with their culture and religion. Illnesses are classified in terms of natural and supernatural. Natural is associated with that of naturalistic medical system as term by Foster and Anderson (1979:53) and supernatural is similar with the personalistic medical system. In Naturalistic system, illness is explained to be cause by natural agents like air, water, wind etc. For this type of illness, the villagers concern medical doctors and depend on medicines. In Personalistic system

'illness is believe to be caused by the active, purposeful intervention of a sensate agent who may be a supernatural being (a deity or a god), a nonhuman being (such as a ghost, ancestor, or evil spirit), or a human being (a witch or sorcerer)'. Those illness caused by ghost or evil spirit are locally called '*gambol*' and those caused by evil eye and witchcraft are called '*kaobol*' and those caused by sorcerer are called '*doibol*'. The belief of personalistic illnesses is still very strong among the villagers. One such case of believing in personalistic system as narrated by the people in Moreh is that a 7 year old girl child suddenly started having high fever and her parents consult various medical doctors who give her medicine for treatment. At first, they thought that the changing of weather or the food which the child had intake is the reason for the illness. In spite of taking various medicines, the illness continues for a week and at last the child passed away. When the doctors and medical science failed to explain the illness, the villagers started to believe that the illness is caused by some supernatural agents. So, they started to check on the history of the last few days of the child before her illness and found that the child happen to play inside the forest. Therefore, the people started assuming that the ghost in the forest killed the child which is locally termed as *gambol*. Problems like crying of babies at night or sudden stomach ache are related with the work of evil eye and they called it as *kaobol*. For treatment of these illnesses the villagers turn to traditional healers. Many traditional healers are mostly found in and around Kuki villages. Most of the processes adopted by the traditional healers for treatment of personalistic involve magic and rituals though Christianity does not permit it. This contradicts the old indigenous practices and the new religion or we can say an amalgamation of both the religion. Besides these, they used different types of green herbs found deep inside forest. Many traditional healers bow down and pray to God before performing their indigenous way of healing illnesses.

Though with the coming of Christianity, the existence of supernaturalism or personalistic medical system may be ignored but it cannot be rule out when they face certain diseases mostly of psychological problems which cannot be cure by doctors. The belief is stronger when sudden misfortune like accidents or death is happens in the family. In one of my field called Sapormeina, there is a mountain called Koubru in the western side and it is consider to be an abode of deities by the non-Christian of Manipur. Thus, many non-Christian pilgrims visit this place every year to pay respect and offer prayers to these deities. But the villagers have different perception about who reside in that sacred mountain. The people of Sapormeina assume that it is the abode of malevolent and benevolent supernatural beings. In the cosmology of the people of Sapormeina, they believe that in that mountain there are agents who affect people psychologically and bodily. The most vulnerable of this kind of attack are grown up boys and girls. The age group of girls who are just attaining puberty are susceptible to have this kind of problems. The basic symptom of supernatural ailment affliction is somatic ailment with vision and hallucination. No medicine would work and it would only start working when supernatural affliction got fading away. Whenever they face these problems they turn to the local healer who deals with supernaturalism.

The belief in evil eye is a look that is believed by many cultures to be able to cause injury or back luck for the person at whom it is directed for reasons of envy or dislike. An evil eye is generally produced because of jealousy and grudge. Those people who possess evil are capable of causing any harm to the people they hate. The effect can be in the form of making someone sick, insane, miscarriage, skin rashes etc. The Kuki also believe that the one who possess evil eye can eat the body parts of the stomach of a person. According to my respondents these people mostly enter a weak person and terminal patients. There is also a belief that sometimes a person passed away but

his body remains alive due to the intervention of such people. The most common way of creating evil eye is through the mechanism of food. Therefore, they throw some portion of the food in the ground before taking it as a sign of offering them so that that they won't get any attack but the practice is not much followed today instead they pray before eating food to drive out the evil spirit as taught by their Christian religion. Most of the people now accept that with the coming of Christianity all these believe are eventually fading away and those of whom that possess this negative personality also loses their power with the intervention of the new faith. Among the contemporary Kuki tribe, there is believe that morality, ethics and duty towards God protect them from getting hit by various illnesses and misfortunes especially those cause by personalistic systems.

Illnesses are explained according to their belief and understanding. An illustration could be when a person is having skin rash; the medical science might explain it as an outcome of the climatic condition or an allergy. But this people explained it to be a cause by some supernatural power like witchcraft or evil eye. Therefore, instead of giving them medicine, they did it with their indigenous knowledge by cutting the hair of the victim and burn the hair and apply it on the effected skin. During the incidence of sudden stomachache after food, the people often thought that it may be due to an evil eye as the victim does not offer the food he intake to the person creating it. This may be explain by medical science as food poisoning contrasting to the traditional beliefs. All this practices are still vastly common among the Kuki people. Khare (1963), where he studied medical practices in the framework of 'parochialization' and 'sanskritization' demonstrating how the upper castes try to relate their etiology in terms of great tradition whereas the lower castes define them in terms of lesser gods and deities. I argue with him in this point because among the Kuki tribe there is similar existence of beliefs and



practices of health commonly among the rich following the great tradition and lower people following lesser tradition.

### **The Traditional Healers**

As diagnosis of illnesses is personally done by the people themselves on the first onset and options of treatment depends upon them whether to go for allopathic or traditional. The causation of the illness gives an idea to which kind of medical system to adopt and the diagnosis for causation of the illness is done by the people itself. This practice leads me to the opinion of Allan Young about 'Assimilation' since choosing of traditional remedies inspite of developed western medicines among the tribe could be due to the this process. According to Young (1976:10), "assimilation refers to instances where people utilize certain alien medical practices, but to the extent that they are knowledgeable about alien medical beliefs they tend to assimilate these to homologous notions in their own medical system". Therefore, there is still an existence of plurality and amalgamation of western and traditional medical system. The healing with traditional remedies started in the domestic household. The mother or the female members of the family are the one taking care of family health. A plant called '*anphui*' and the leave of passion fruits are eaten as vegetable which is highly used in controlling diabetes and high blood pressure. Another plant locally called '*nongmangkha*' is also used for treatment of cold and cough. Honey, ginger and lemon are also of medicinal value. They also consume a plant called '*nakuppi*' for protecting from kidney problems. All these plants are serve in the house by mothers or female members ensuring good health to their family. Some animal products are also belief to have high medicinal values. The liver of bear is used for stomachache and some people keep it for safety. They soak the liver of bear in water, keep overnight and drink the water whenever they have stomach pain. Sometimes a lay person also

plays the role of a healer in some incidence of when a person assuming to be caught by an evil eye or by witch. They do it by pinching both the toe of the victim while he is in deep sleep and asking 'Who are you'. The people assume that toe is an exit point of those possessing evil eye or witchcraft and by pinching them the accuse person will also feel the pain. The belief is that when the accuse person finds it unbearable, he or she have to surrender and leave the victim. Another practice is by trapping the victim with fishing net in order to catch the accused and make him surrender. Sometimes they also cut the hair of the victim to identify the accuse person because they assume that the accuse person hair will also be shorten similarly.

The treatment of a professional traditional is different from the domestic treatment. They collect herbs found in the deep forest area and they made into liquid or tablet form. The blood and meat of dog is used for treatment of illnesses caused by supernatural being, witchcraft or evil eye. Scorpion and a unique type of lizard locally called '*to-ke*' are used for cancer treatment. There are many patients who gets cure by them. The traditional healers deal with all kinds of diseases starting from simple illnesses to the one which they believe to be caused by supernatural power. The traditional healer at my field area Sapormeina is called Paokhongam (Ngampu) Kipgen. He is brought up in a Christian family and every step he takes in his work is done according to the will of God. He is taught this traditional way of treatment from Pakho who was a pastor in the church and gifted with the making of herbal medicines and treating of illnesses that is believed to be caused by supernatural power. After he passed away his work is continued by Ngampu, the local healer of Sapormeina village and the tradition is still carried on today. Though in this contemporary world allopathic medicines are gaining its highest place, the use of traditional medicine still persist on many lives.

The type of herbs he used is not found adjacent to the village and he gathered the herbs from the inner part of the forests. He integrates them for making herbal medicine. He does not reveal the type of herbs he used for his work therefore it was not known to others except to his close ones. The types of medicines he make are in the form of syrup, tablet and paste. Sometimes he sacrifices animals like dog, chicken for curing illness which are serious and believe to be caused by supernatural powers. Therefore he has authority to treat any diseases he is capable of, according to the needs of the people in and around the village. Many people rely in him for various treatments which they believe to be done by malevolent or benevolent supernatural agent and so on. The type of illness he dealt with comprised of epilepsy, injuries, abdominal pain which he termed as Kaobol, psychological problem which he termed as Gambol, various gynaecological problems like infertility, miscarriage etc. Most of the cases he dealt are psychological problems. The first ritual performed for treating Kaobol and Gambol is by chanting a prayer and then killing a dog. The blood of the dog is then sprinkled on the patient. This is done to know the exact cause of the illness and treatment is followed by giving the medicines made by him. Another major case he dealt with is infertility. He said that there are many barren women who are healed by him. He used to massage the womb of the barren woman and sometimes he said that the womb is filled with many filthy things or sometimes the womb is not at the proper place. After putting the womb at the right place and after driving all the unwanted substances from the womb, the barren woman becomes pregnant. He is well known in and around the village.

Another traditional healer is called Thongkholun of Moreh, an Indo-Burma border. He inherited the knowledge of ethno medicine from his father and starts practicing in 1982. He also consult the book on ethno medicine written by Pu Lalkhohen, a famous ethno medicinal among the Kukis during

the 60s and 70s. He started his first practice by healing children's illness like convulsion, asthma and baby crying at night. He diagnosed illnesses by touching with his own figure, checking the temperature and make medicine according to age and illnesses. He treats all kind of illnesses like sinus, white water discharge, gastric problems, anaemia, sleeplessness, piles, malaria, typhoid, tuberculosis, BP, TB, ENT problems cancer, etc. He made medicine by mixing herbs found from deep forest or high mountain. Most of the medicines are in syrup form and tablet. He makes sure that if a patient take his medicine he should not mixed with allopathic and homeopathic medicine. He had different kinds of detector for diagnosing illnesses. For detecting blood pressure, he used a stone locally called *gip* which is brown in colour. For detecting all kinds of sickness he used *Kehchang* which is black in colour. For detecting personalistic problems, he used the liver of bear. The detectors are kept in the feet for knowing the illnesses and according to that he made syrup and ointment. For treatment of liver problem, he used pumpkin which is of two years old, cut in the middle, mixed with tamarind and sugar of equal weight and kept it for 2 days and 3 night and then peel it off. The bone crack or fracture is massage with the mixture of oil of *Ngalvang*, honey and ginger. For menstrual cramp or white discharge he mixed the outer over of wood with straw and brown sugar. He treats heart disease with pomegranate and honey. For urinary tract infection he mixed raw papaya boiled with sugar and a plant called *ponkap che*. There are also different types of medicine he made for treatment of diabetes, cancer, dysentery, etc.

Another traditional healer is called Veilam of Imphal. She gained her knowledge from her husband who was also a well-known traditional healer during 70s and 80s. Most of the medicine she used is made by integrating herbs found in forest and the medicine is in tablet form which is of different colours. Previously when her husband was alive the medicines were of

more than 10 varieties but now she can make only three different tablets. Her area of treatment is only on personalistic problems like evil eye, witchcraft and magic. She said that whenever she made medicine and dry it, half of the medicine get lost. She said that it is done out of anger by those who practice evil eye, witchcraft and magic. She also said that whenever she treats a patient, one of the members of her family always got an attack in the night in the form of stomach-ache, fever and unconscious. She can diagnose any personalistic problem by looking at the patient eyes and by touching her pulse. She also can tell the person responsible for the attack but she cannot reveal the name. Most of her patients are children and for children's security she hangs her medicine in the stomach with the help of a thread. Another way of detecting illnesses, she used a stone and put it on the patient stomach. One case of her treatment is a pregnant woman being attack by witchcraft. There is concept that as pregnant women are weak there are high chances of being victim to witches. The incident happens when the one who perform witchcraft went to ask for financial help to the sister of the pregnant woman. When the victim sister is willing to give the money, the victim oppose to this idea telling her sister to give only half of the amount of what the accused ask for. The belief of the Kuki people is that the witch can hear all the gossip about them if there is no river that falls between the gossip and the witch. Therefore, the witch hears all their conversations and thus performs witchcraft out of grudges. The pregnant woman started to have psychological problem by crying endlessly. At this time, the family of the victim called the traditional healer and once the healer press her pulse and give the medicine she make, the victim gain conscious. But they could not save the child in her womb because they belief that the child is eaten by the witch. There are many more incidence and illnesses treated by this healer.

## **Parallelism in health beliefs and practices with other cultures**

Many societies of the world are sharing some similarities in terms of their medical beliefs and practices. Though there might be cultural barriers, language differences and differences in religion beliefs, there are some similarities in the traditional health beliefs and practices. One problem of Kuki women which is similar with other culture is the gynaecological problems especially barrenness. These problems of women are found to be somewhat similar to the word 'caught' coined by Victor Turner while studying the Ndembu of Africa. According to Victor Turner, "Being 'caught' means to be afflicted with bad luck at hunting in the case of men, with reproductive disorder in the case of women, and illness in both cases" (1957:292). The Kuki women also believe that when they are barren, they are caught by evil eye or witchcraft. For this treatment, the Kuki sometimes rely on allopathic medicine or consult the herbalist or traditional healers. The rituals performed by the traditional healers in treating gynaecological problems also shows some similarity with that of the rituals performed among the Ndembu of Africa. Similarity is also among the Kuki tribe with the Nupe, a muslim community of Africa. According to S.F. Nadel in his study of Nupe Religion highlighted that though the Nupe community get access to the European medical system, they think of it as 'hopeless and their remedies to be no better than the indigenous healers locally called *cigbecizi*' for the treatment of impotence or sterility or to procure sterility (1954:162). The barren woman among Kuki tribe also depends on traditional healer believing that they conceive when the healer keeps their womb in the correct position. The Kukis believe more on the traditional healers than the medical doctors for the treatment of sterility. Another similarity found is in the way of diagnosis of illnesses between the traditional healers among the Kukis and Deowar (traditional healer) of the Korwa

tribe of Chattisgarh. Both the healers of the two tribes diagnosed the patient by feeling his or her pulse and accordingly announced the reason of illness to be natural or supernatural by the pulse movement. There is similarity exists between Azande of Africa with the Kukis. They both relate dreams with witchcraft. Azande beliefs about bad dreams and shows that they regard them as real experiences. Likewise the Kuki also believe that whenever they saw a dog in a dream, they believe that it is a sign of an attack that is going to happen. Another similarity is also found with that of the people of Junga in Himachal Pradesh. The people of Junga also diagnosed their illnesses firstly in their home which is similar with the Kukis. On the onset if illnesses homemade remedies is used firstly in both the culture. Both the culture used mixture of ginger, honey and hot water for treatment of cold and cough. Both the culture categorised illnesses to be cause by two agents either by personalistic agents or naturalistic agents. Looking into all the above examples we can say that though people are living in different geographical location having their own unique culture, customs and languages, they somehow share similarities in terms of traditional health beliefs and practices.

## **Conclusion**

The study on traditional health beliefs, practices and healers among the Kukis shows how indigenous knowledge is still instil in the heart of the people. Though the Kuki people witness many changes in the form of modernization, globalization, food habits, dress pattern, etc, there is still continuation of culture in terms of health care system. It can also be concluded that though medical science is progressing, the Kuki people still like to go for treatment in their indigenous way of understanding and practices. It can also be concluded that health is totally interwoven with a person's notion, culture and society. The diagnosis of any illness is done by the people itself and the

option for treatment is also done by them. The traditional healers also play an important role in the health care system of the Kukis. In fact they are the one who satisfied the people quest for sudden illnesses or peculiar type for illnesses. It can also be concluded that though the Kuki are small tribe living in North-east India and some parts of Burma and Bangladesh, they share common beliefs and practices in terms of health with different culture of the world.

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