



ASPECTS OF INDIGENOUS ADI CULTURE

Kento Mitkong

Assistant Professor (Guest)
Department of Social Work
Arunachal Pradesh University, Pasighat, India

Abstract: This study has been undertaken to understand the aspects of indigenous Adi culture. Both tangible and non-tangible aspects of the Adi culture have been studied. Their culture lacks proper script of their own but has been passed down from generation to generation through oral transmission. Adi tribe has been accorded the status of schedule tribe as per provision laid down in the Indian constitution. This study is an attempt to document some aspects of their indigenous culture, which is witnessing rapid transformation due to forces of modernity.

INTRODUCTION

The Adis are the maiden tribe inhabiting the East Siang, Siang, Upper Siang and parts of Lower Dibang Valley and West Siang districts of the present-day Arunachal Pradesh. They are well established and settled in other parts of the state too. They are one of the tribes within the Tani group, who speaks Tibeto Burmese language and belongs to the mongoloid bloodline. The Tani group is a coalition of tribes who consider Abutani as a legendary figure and their ancestral primogenitor.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 169 defines indigenous peoples as those descended from populations inhabiting a region before colonization or the formation of current state boundaries, and who retain their traditional institutions. Merriam-Webster defines "indigenous" as naturally existing in a particular region. Sociologist Emile Durkheim views religion as a system of beliefs and practices concerning sacred things that unite people into a moral community. For the Adi community, indigenous religion Donyi Polo is a central part of their life cycle.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY.

To understand the underlying cultural aspects of the Adi community.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative and ethnographic approach to explore the indigenous faith and culture of the Adi community. The aim is to uncover the depth of their traditions. A descriptive research design is used, relying primarily on interviews and observations as sources of primary data. The study also uses secondary sources like journals, research papers, and newspapers. Theoretical sampling guided the selection of participants, and unstructured, in-depth interviews were held with local priests (miris), leaders, and other individuals, emphasizing the link between religious practices and everyday life.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Indigenous religion or Donyi Polo

The Adis were one of the early communities in Arunachal Pradesh to have organized their indigenous belief system. Under the initiative of Talom Rukbo naming of the belief system "Donyi Polo" materialized in the year 1964. He represented the faith at the global stage in the International Association of Religious Freedom Congress in 1984, 1985, and 1986. The place of worship for the Donyi Polo followers is called Gangging, which is headed by Taabe or Gangging Abu, appointed by the apex body DPYK (Donyi Polo Yelam Kebang). Various rituals such as community prayers, Riidin tying (sacred thread), Epak (traditional healing), Asi Kumi (holy water sprinkling) takes place here. The Riidiin is a sacred, hand-spun white thread made from Pueraria lobata creepers. Tied on the left wrist for males and the right for females, it symbolizes love, protection and serves as an Adi identity. Traditionally, maternal uncles and aunts ties it to their nephews and nieces, however Miri Abus (priests) may also while performing ritual in the Gangging (prayer house) ties it to the devotees. Riidiin tied with prayers to Kongki-Komang, ancestral figures, are believed to bring healing. Worship services inside the Gangging are held every Sundays using the prayer book called Angun Bedang. Traditional Gangging structures are made from bamboo and Teek (Livistona Jenkinsiana), with a single entrance and a white triangular flag marked with a red sun placed outside.

Miris

The Miris, are ceremonial leaders of Adi rituals, who can be either male or female and are believed to possess innate ritual knowledge. A person becomes a Miri when possessed by the spirit of a deceased Miri, making it a hereditary role passed through lineage. Based on their abilities and roles, Miris are categorized into various types. Ayit Miris are the most important, responsible for performing Emul paknam (tying of sacred objects) and Ipak (removal of evil omen rituals) by using items such as ekkam (phrynium leaves), eggs, bamboo, and chanting of hymns. They are considered to spiritually transform into animals and suffer physically if they happen to neglect their duties. Jiktum Miris performs Liimeng, a traditional method of identifying criminals or predicting future events, using objects such as stones, bamboo, water, and grains. Solung Miris recite Aabang during the Solung festival, initiating the celebration in the Mushup (community hall). Etor Miris recite chants during the Etor festival and may be substituted by Ayit Miris if needed. Yakjong Miris leads the traditional dances during the Aran festival. Etlik Miris are traditional bone healers and are given offerings like Kepel to prevent any recurrence of injury. Some Miris can perform multiple roles across these categories, reflecting the flexibility and understanding of the Adi religious system. Each type of Miri plays an essential part in preserving the community's spiritual and cultural practices, linking rituals, healing, agriculture, festivals, and ancestral belief system.

Pantheon of the Adi religion

Within the Adi belief system, several guardian spirits are venerated for their distinct roles in sustaining life. Kine Nane is the female guardian of agriculture, Dadi Bote is worshipped for household animals, Doying Bote is the guardian of knowledge, and Gumin Soyin protects households. Of these, Kine Nane and Dadi Bote are worshipped during festivals through animal sacrifices such as pigs, hens, and mithun, while Kine Nane also receives offerings called Binyat, consisting of rice, vegetables, and rice beer. Interestingly, despite the name Donyi Polo is the name of the traditional Adi religion. Donyi meaning Sun and Polo meaning Moon—however neither the sun nor the moon is a deity of the faith. They are instead praised as reminders of the love of Sedi Melo, the supreme deity and originator of all creation in the Adi belief system. According to a Taabe Abu, Sedi Melo is the true orator of the world, from whom all existence evolved. The Adis believe that humans possess two souls—Yitme, responsible for dreams, and Yitlong, the essential life soul. Death occurs when Yitlong departs the body. While only humans are believed to have souls, belongings of the deceased are buried with them, suggesting a symbolic continuity in the afterlife. Distinguished souls, especially those who earned recognition in life, are believed to dwell in special places like Alu Aseng, a sacred hill in Upper Siang. Death rituals vary depending on the nature of death: in natural deaths, family and relatives perform last rites before burial, but in accidental deaths (Taleng Simang), the body is buried without being brought back at home for last rituals. Even in the case of stillbirths, the corpse is placed in bamboo canes and left at the forest.

Aabangs

A significant feature of Adi religion and culture is the recitation of Aabangs, traditional orations chanted during festivals like Solung and Etor by Miris. These oral narratives explain the origins of life, the taming of animals, and other cosmic phenomena. Aabangs such as Tani Aabang, Sedi Melo Aabang, and Donam Tinam Aabang can be categorized as either religious or cultural. The Keyum Kero Aabang, a religious chant, narrates the Adi cosmology—starting from darkness (Keyum Kero) to the appearance of all life forms through stages till the formation of the first man (Sedi Litung) and woman (Sedi Liimang), from them led the birth of Tani, who is considered the first true human without any divinity but possession of intelligence and skill. The Adi people consider themselves as the descendants of Tani.

Religious Festivals

The Adis celebrate seasonal festivals that are deeply religious in nature, as most are dedicated to Kine Nane, the guardian of agricultural produce. These festivals are conducted either in community halls or in individual homes. According to a Miri, there are traditionally nine festivals (Gidis) in Adi society. Pimeng Yageng is celebrated between July and August when the paddy begins to turn yellow—pimeng means paddy and yageng means yellow. Solung, held in September, is a thanksgiving before harvest. It involves sacrificing pigs and mithuns through hanging and strangling. A woman chosen from the community offers Binyat—a mixture of eggs, rice, rice beer, and etting (rice paste) at the paddy field to appease Kine Nane. Ampu Dorung is celebrated after the harvest, involving hunting of rats by men, while in some villages, Eso Dorung includes mithun sacrifices. Uying Aran is a major hunting festival where men offer rice beer and sacrificed meat to their maternal uncles and aunts for protection from evil spirits. This is also the time to give Oome Aare/Kepel (girl's price). Tapu involves collecting wood for house construction. Kombi, celebrated during winters, marks the end of agricultural activities. Siki Mopun is dedicated to Kine Nane in appreciation for a good harvest, while Taku honors Doying Bote, the guardian of mankind. Taku usually follows Etor, during which community members fences paddy fields together.

Traditional Dances

Apart from traditional festivals, Donyi Polo Day is celebrated on December 1st, with events like speeches, singing competitions, dances, feasts and fairs. Adi dances are central to these festivals and are performed in groups wearing traditional attire, surrounding a Miri who recites Aabangs (ritual chants). The dancers move clockwise, waving their hands and flipping thighs rhythmically. There are six types of dances according to an interviewee which are Solung Ponung, performed only by women and girls during Solung festival, features continuous day and night dances around the Miri who recites Binyat Aabang and other chants. Dancers hold hands crossed over elbows and shoulders while repeating chants in chorus. Etor Delong is performed by men during Etor, with chants like Ekob Taktor and Limir Sobo, where dancers face sideways and rotate around the main altar in the Mushup (community). Yakjong is an informal dance done by different age and gender groups, visiting homes and performing to bless the families. They receive food items as gifts, which are later shared in a community feast after three nights. Tapu, the war dance, is performed by men dressed in traditional war gear, wielding swords and shields while roaring together. Pone is danced by mixed groups during new house inaugurations, marking the first brew of Apong from the Petok (bamboo made container for filtrating rice beer). Yamrik, though not traditional, is a modern dance used to honour guests at public gatherings and can be performed by both men and women, accompanied by a singer. Thus, festivals and dances of the Adis not only reflect their agrarian lifestyle but also serve as a medium of religious expression, community bonding, and cultural preservation.

Marriages

The Adis follow the practice of exogamy, meaning marriage within the same clan or among related clans is strictly prohibited, as all members of a clan are considered one family. Violation of this norm through endogamy results in social exclusion. Both arranged and love marriages are common, with the groom's family offering Aare/Kepel (bride price) to the bride's family. This typically

includes pigs, keka (a rare squirrel), and Reying Apong (rice beer), but no live animals. After marriage, the husband may temporarily live with his wife's family until he builds his own home. Adi society is egalitarian, with no hierarchical structure or chiefs; all are regarded as equals. However, a body called Gam Bura/ Kebang Abu, comprising elderly members, exists to mediate between the people and the government. This system, introduced during the colonial period under the Assam Frontier (Administration of Justice) Regulation, 1945, continues today, with members appointed by the Deputy Commissioner. The Gaon Buras also preside over Kebang, the community court. The Adis follows a patrilineal system. Property and animals are inherited by male children, with the eldest son (Obing) having a greater share, and the youngest son inheriting the family house and is responsible for caring for parents. Daughters receive family ornaments such as Tadok and Beyop and rather have no claim to ancestral property such as land and animals. Upon marriage, a woman adopts her husband's clan title. If a family has no male heir, the father's nearest male relative inherits the property after his death. A custom called Simang Yubinam is in which a person performs the last rites of an unattended deceased. This ritual results in the creation of kin clans, where the deceased's family either becomes a member of deceased's clan or establishes a link through kinship.

CONCLUSION

Donyi Polo, the indigenous belief system of the Adis has the elements of being animist i.e. involvement of various rituals for appeasing spirits. The nature of this religion can be considered polytheist due to presence of different Gods and Goddesses. About worshipping, Donyi Polo does not promote idol or image worship, but symbolic images may be found on the walls of the Gangging (prayer house), these are intended as representations to honour and remember spiritual guardians, not for worship. The cultural, religious, and traditional practices of the Adis not only reflect their uniqueness and composite identity but also showcase the wisdom of their ancestors. It is hard to retain cultures which are based on oral traditions, preserving and practicing such traditions may get threat from elements of modernity and other dominant cultures. As a result of these, efforts should be made by stakeholders such as academicians, spiritual leaders, organisations, etc to preserve the old age culture of the Adi community. Various Legislation has already been made at state, national and international platforms for its preservation, perhaps importance should be given to its implementation.

Studying Adi culture or to say, any tribal societies will be more meaningful if both emic (insider) and etic (outsider) perspectives are applied for understanding phenomena governing culture and traditions. Proper cultural interpretation can be achieved only after examining the reason and orientation of the act by the social actor. In the case of contemporary Adi society, prevalence of modern or westernized cultural elements is visible especially among the younger population for e.g. there are changes in the choices of attires, dietary habits, lifestyles and migration for better opportunities. However, cultural continuity is still being maintained alongside modernisation especially in the intangible aspects of culture such as clan affiliation, dialect, celebration of local festivals, etc.

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