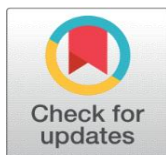


KHOI-TANBA: WORLDVIEW OF CHASING BEES AND WASP AWAY BY THE KHURKHULS OF MANIPUR

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ABSTRACT

This field work based paper is the outcome of the anthropological study conducted in the Khurkhul village of Manipur where the 'Khoi-tanba', is performed as a way of warding off the evils from causing death and miseries in the family. 'Khoi-tanba', literally meaning chasing the bees/wasp away, in Manipuri language, is an aged old magico-religious practice of the 'Meiteis' still performed by the 'Khurkhuls' in the Khurkhul village in Manipur with the help of a 'Maiba', a male religious leader authorised for sacred performances and also a traditional healer on the belief that the presence of a typical bee hive/s (but not of the honey bees) in someone's homestead particularly on the Northern or the 'Awang' side of the house will bring inevitable death in the family. Getting rid of giant bees and wasp is a means of getting rid of psychological fears from causing havoc in the family and to relief from the apprehension of damaging their mental health conditions. The main objective of studying the cult of 'Khoi-tanba' is to understand their traditional ways of preventive measures towards mental health. The Khurkhuls are much concerned about their health and the concept of health among them is not just the mere absence of diseases. All that activities for seeking good health as well as the treatment of already afflicted ones requires both modern and traditional practices. It is evident that physical well-being and mental satisfaction are two sides of the same coin: one cannot live a healthy life without honouring the mental aspect. The present study adopted standard techniques of modern ethnographic research such as Observation, Case study and Interview. The primary data were collected from the traditional health practitioners or the 'Maibas' as well as members of the households in question. The results of the study indicated that 'Khoi-tanba' cannot be performed on any day but only on the specific days of the particular month known as the 'tatnaba numit' because it is not considered to be an auspicious occasion as per their schemas. Further, it also involves the leaves of the sacred 'tairen' (Toona ciliata) and hymns chanted by the 'maiba' to avoid miseries from multitudes of spirits in mischief.

Keywords: Khurkhul, wasp, Maiba, Tatnaba numit, Mental Health, Traditional healer

1. INTRODUCTION

Bee, wasp and hornet are insects of similar kinds of which bees are fuzzy, flying insects with yellow and black stripes whereas wasps and hornets have similar hairless bodies though the latter two differ in colour. Several ethnic groups around the globe have cultural values of these insects. Among the Southern African ethnic group, Pedi culture, a swarm of bees in the yard is always taken as a symbol of the ancestors bringing luck to the family. Honeybees play important role in human lives as they are managed by beekeepers to allow for honey harvesting and to provide a pollination service to farmers of pollinator-dependent crops (Mswazi 2014). Besides, apiculture or beekeeping is a centuries-old tradition having important significance for obtaining honey useful for medicinal purposes as well as cultural practices. In Hindu mythology, Goddess Bhramari, the Goddess of black bees who was an incarnation of goddess Shakti slew the demon called Arunasura by sending out bees, wasps, hornets, and other insects (Moore 2013). In Africa, a wasp nest in the house considered a good or bad omen; however, bee swarms are feared from magical realm (Huis 2020). Thus, the insects are

beneficial as well as fearsome. The witch doctors remove such fears to relieve from the unexpected psychological disturbances. The present paper tries to discuss the cognitive meaning of nesting wasps and its cultural remedy as ethno-medicine among the Khurkhul people of Manipur in India.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Warding off the evils is a preventive measure to relieve the fear psychosis that is threatening one's mental health. They are much concerned about their health and rely on the practices of plural therapeutic system of treatments. Every society has a shared belief and behaviour about the prevention and treatment of illness. These shared belief and behaviour about the prevention and treatment of illness constitute the medical systems of a society. The wrath of gods, spirits, and evil supernatural affect the well-being of man and cause diseases (Adivasi, 2006; Abdullah et al., 2014; Karua, 2015). They may send miseries through curious agents. Wrath of supernatural forces to cause miseries and disease are reported from different communities - Dhurwa tribe (Soni and Pradhan, 2016), Munda tribe (Fatima, 2010), Santals (Karua, 2015), and Batek community (Endicott, 1979).

Health is an 'overall sense of well-being', which means that it is "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (Grad 2002). The benefits of medical, psychological and related knowledge are essential to the fullest attainment of health. But as the health systems include cultural perceptions and classification of health-related issues, diagnosis, prevention, healing practices, and healers for decades (Miller 2011). Understanding of health and illness among humans relate to "identify, assess and solve contemporary problems" (Gezen and Kottak 2014).

Traditional medicine also called as indigenous medicine or folk medicine or ethnomedicine and it comprises medical aspects of traditional knowledge that developed over generations within various societies before the era of modern medicine. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines traditional medicine as "the sum total of the knowledge, skills, and practices based on the theories, beliefs, and experiences indigenous to different cultures, whether explicable or not, used in the maintenance of health as well as in the prevention, diagnosis, improvement or treatment of physical and mental illness." According to Ackerknecht (1947), the disease and its treatment are only the abstract purely biological processes but the fact that a person gets diseased and what kind of treatment he receives, including diet and rest, depend on social and cultural factors. Seeking of treatment also vary from society to society and person to person but the consultant is a sacred priest, who has the knowledge of the supernatural powers (Chauhan, A. 2014; Shukla, & Chakravarty 2010). The traditional healers in different areas and ethnic groups give treatment of medicine with or without spiritual energy (Jain 1982; Jaggi 1973; Koarenoff & George 1970; DHEW 1974).

In this way, viewing bee or natural things in their environment tend to be looked from cultural angle as well as from ethnomedicinal perspective for mental health. Here, it is needed to be observed from context.

3. METHOD AND TECHNIQUE

The present study adopted standard techniques of modern ethnographic research such as observation, case study and interview for data collection. Person to person interviews were conducted with a view to elicit individual perspectives on issues relating to health. To supplement the interviews, informal discussions were held with various people. Secondary sources as archives, records and libraries were also relied upon for more background information. Secondary materials ranging from newspaper articles to published scholarly texts such as journals and books relevant to the topic were also consulted. In depth interviews were conducted with currently practising local *Maiba* and *Maibi* (traditional priestesses of Manipur who are believed to be the spiritual medium since days of yore). The empirical study was conducted among the Loi section of the Meitei people at Khurkhul village, Imphal West district in Manipur, India. But they are rather known by the toponym - the Khurkhuls.

4. LAND AND PEOPLE

The Khurkhul village inhabited by the Loi section of the Meitei village is located in Lamshang Sub Division under the Imphal West district in Manipur and about about 17 km north from the state capital on the sides of the Imphal-Leimakhong road. The Scheduled Caste village has a population of 6,450 of which 3,300 are males and 3,150 are females in 1,344 houses as per Population Census 2011. The average sex ratio of Khurkhul village is 955 which is lower than the state average of 985. Children with age 0-6 are 842 which make up 13.05% of the total population of the village. Child sex ratio recorded as 826 is lower than the state average of 930. The village literacy rate of 78.16% is higher than the state literacy rate of 76.94%. The male literacy rate of Khurkhul stands at 87.04% while the female literacy rate is

69.05%. Out of the total population 2,616 are engaged in work activities and 65.83% of these workers are described as main work either employment or earning more than 6 months while 34.17% are involved in marginal activities providing livelihood for less than 6 months. There are 875 cultivators with owned or co-owner while 69 are the agricultural labourers.

They have been practicing their own traditional ways of preventive as well as curative health care measures with the help of traditional health practitioners or the healers commonly known as the 'maiba' for male 'maibi' for female. In Khurkhul, traditional healers play an important and valuable role in helping their community to improve their health and quality of life. Their role is that of physician, counsellor, psychiatrist and priest, and people visit a traditional healer, maiba or maibi for problems ranging from social uncertainties to major physical illness. They therefore, have a role to play in building the health system. As most of the illness and treatments are culture-bound, many areas are left untouched by the Western medical practitioners.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Khoi-tanba:

The people of Khurkhul know bee, wasp and hornet by the common term *khoi*. They are fond of honeybee locally called the *hayingkhoi* (combination of the word 'haying' meaning the fly and 'khoi' the bees). But when it comes to the other varieties of 'khoi' or the bees particularly the most dreaded giant bee or wasp, *Vespa mandarina*, locally called the "khoi-ningthou" ('khoi' literally meaning bees and 'ningthou' meaning king), hence, the king of bees, it attracts immediate attention requiring to carry out a ritualistic process of the "Khoi-tanba", i.e. the chasing the giant bees and wasp away from the premises of one's homestead as soon as the location of its nest is noticed. If one fails to carry out the ritualistic "khoi-tanba", it is believed that miseries will fall upon and even death may take place in the family.

The stings of the khoi-ningthou are among the most venomous; its stinger is typically 6mm (1/4 in) long and delivers potent venom. But it is not only the fear of the probable danger or the outcome of being bitten by these poisonous bees to the family members, children or the cattle, but, the actual location of its nest in one's homestead is more fearsome to them. After the detection of any of the hornet nest called the 'khoi-mahum', one is not very willing to 'continue his daily work' and 'not able to concentrate in proper sleep or eat' until it is chased away or destroyed by performing the 'khoi-tanba' rituals with the help of a 'maiba'. It is traditionally believed that if the hornet nest is located in the southern side of the house, it brings miseries and may even cause death of family members. And in case the nest is located in the northern side, it is believed that luck and happiness may prevail. However, in both cases they have to perform the ritualistic 'khoi-tanba' as soon as it is located.

FORECAST

In the olden days, a homestead in the village was very big area and the traditional Meitei houses were built on the western side of the garden of the homestead, leaving more space on the eastern side. A number of vegetables, trees, plants and bamboos were planted in the homestead land. Therefore, many bees used to make hives. By observing the location of the bee hive/ nest locally known as the *khoi-mahum* some forecasts were made that was based on the traditional beliefs. Even to the present days, this superstitious belief still exists in their society. The following is the forecasts predicted according to the direction of the location of the 'khoi-mahum' inside one's homestead.

<u>Direction in which the nest is located</u>	<u>Forecast for the Family</u>
<i>Kha</i> (South)	<i>Ashiba nangngi</i> (death may occur)
<i>Meiram</i> (South-East)	<i>Ana ayek nangngi</i> (causes illness)
<i>Moiranglaji</i> (South-West)	<i>Ana ayek nangngi</i> (causes illness)
<i>Nongchup</i> (West)	<i>Phamnaiba phangngi</i> (achieves higher status)
<i>Koubru</i> (North-West)	<i>Punshi</i> (gives longevity)
<i>Chingkhei</i> (North-East)	<i>Macha shiba nangngi</i> (death of son/daughter)
<i>Awang</i> (North)	<i>Lou phei</i> (good harvest)
<i>Nongpok</i> (East)	<i>Sagol shamu tongngi</i> (promotions)

Tatnaba numits (unpropitious days):

The *tatnaba numits*, according to the Meitei lunar calendar are the particular days in a month that are considered not auspicious. Therefore, on such a particular day important works like buying of new land or gold, starting new ventures, etc. are not done. The *tatnaba numits* as per the Meitei calendar, for the month of *Shajibu* (April), *Thawan* (August) and *Poinu* (December) are Sunday and Monday. While that of *Kalen* (May), *Langban* (September) and *Wakching* (January)

are Friday and Wednesday. Thus, for the month of *Engnga* (June), *Mera* (October) and *Fairen* (February), the *tatnaba numits* are Tuesday and Saturday. For the month of *Engen* (July), *Hiyanggei* (November) and *Lamta* (March), it is Thursday and Saturday.

The “khloi-tanba” is considered as inauspicious occasion and therefore, it is performed only on such a day of *tatnaba numit* under the supervision of a ‘maiba’, who will pray to the supreme deities not to cause any harm to the family and seek blessings by offering *Chempak* (pounded rice/paddy), *Sangom* (milk), *Khohi* (honey), *Chungougi chuhi* (sugarcane juice), and *Laphoi* (banana), etc. It was also compulsory for the ‘maiba’ to sprinkle holy water by using the religious leaves of a tree called ‘Tairen’ (*Cedrela toona*).

The brief prayer chanted by the ‘maiba’ seeking the blessing is as follows:

.....Kuru gi khoi dagi thorak ena
Nanggi namingdi khoi koubni
Khamnunggi yamaraj na nangbu
Taibang mibu awaba piruro na
Ngangbu thoudarakpa matamda
Nang ngashidagi awaba pibiraganu
Ngashi nanggi nachinjak pirabani
Hinggol ashida ngashidagidi
tinnngamba-laingamba pumnamak
Mangang Luwang Khuman kuru ahumakna
Tingkokpirammo laikokpirammo
Nungaiba yaifaba pibirammo
punshirol nungshangba khaibirammo
hairagaleishing naihanbirakkano
leirang leisha khainahanbirakkano
Nungai yaifaba bor pibirammo
Nang ngashidagi chatkhro.....

(Free translation: khoi which comes out from the naval (locally called khoi) of God to give miseries to mankind, today you are given your food and please be carried away sorrows and bless us to prosperity)



The ‘maiba’ performing ‘khloi-tanba’ prayer by offering mixture of sweet items.

Nesting of wasp or bee is an important consideration in the worldview of the Khurkhuls. It may predict misfortunes despite their venomous bites. Though the literacy rate is high among the people, it is still feared and the mental disturbance is ritualistically treated. The fear is expressed recurrently and so, the pscho-cultural treatment still prevails among this Scheduled Caste people.

6. CONCLUSION

The Scheduled Caste people of Khurkhul are to certain extend traditionalist by nature. They still practice their ancient traditional medicines and are much concerned about good health. The study of their traditional healing practices reveals the use of “Khloi-tanba” performance by a ‘maiba’ to chase away unwanted types of bees called the ‘khloi-ningthou’ when their nest is built in particular directions of their homestead on specific days called the ‘tatnaba numit’ as a means for warding off the evil spirits and to seek blessings for peace and prosperities. The case presented in this paper

demonstrates the experimental reality of one of the traditional ways of health seeking behaviours in Khurkhul. There is strong beliefs that the ritualistic performance of the 'khoi-tanba' will relief one's fear psychosis and give mental peace to lead a normal life.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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