

## TRADITIONAL HEALTH SEEKING BEHAVIOUR OF THE KHURKHULS OF MANIPUR

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### ABSTRACT

*The present paper is based on anthropological field work conducted in Khurkhul village in Manipur. The people of Khurkhul now popularly known as the Khurkhuls have their own concepts of the causes and curing of diseases. As such, disease is viewed as a supernatural phenomenon governed by a hierarchy of vital powers beginning with the most powerful deity followed by lesser spiritual entities, ancestral spirits, living persons, animals, plants and other objects. There is a belief in the interaction between the spiritual and physical well being. Traditional healers, called maiba and maibi therefore, use a holistic approach in dealing with health and illness by providing treatment for physical, psychological, spiritual and other social symptoms. Their traditional healing practices maintain both aspects of physical well being and mental satisfactions.*

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**Keywords:** Ancestral Spirits, Khurkhul, Maiba, MAIBI, Supernatural Phenomenon, Traditional Healers.

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### Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO), in its broadest term defined health with reference to 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). Further, the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, and political belief, economic or social condition.

The health systems include cultural perceptions and classification of health-related issues, diagnosis, prevention, healing practices, and healers (Miller, 2011), for decades, anthropologists have been studying the interaction of cultural values and norms on health-related issues, and that, the western medical practitioners are beginning to use anthropological data to better understand their multicultural patients' responses to 'modern' health care practices. Furthermore, Medical anthropologists have contributed towards the understanding of health and illness among humans by using anthropological research methods and results to "identify, assess and solve contemporary problems" (Genzen & Kottak, 2014: 240).

Traditional medicine also called as indigenous medicine or folk medicine and it comprises medical aspects of traditional knowledge that developed over generations within various societies before the era of modern medicine. The word traditional medicine is also sometimes used as a synonym for ethno 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".

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Traditional healers hold an esteem and powerful position. Traditional healers can play important and valuable role in helping communities to improve their health and quality of life. Their role is that of physician, counsellor, psychiatrists, and priest, and people visit a traditional healer for problems ranging from social dilemmas to major medical illness. They, therefore have a role to play in building the health system so far. To understand illness behaviour, the native perceptions regarding the disease and illness are necessary. 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. In case of any sickness, the Bhotia tribe in Mana village of Uttarakhand first go to allopathic doctors and use the medicines prescribed by them. But when they find that the treatment is not enough, they go to 'puchher', a sacred priest, who has the knowledge of the supernatural powers (Chauhan, 2014). After studying Traditional medicinal practices among the Raj-Gonds of Korba district of Chhattisgar, (Rajesh Shukla and Moyna Chakravarty, 2010), reported that the Raj-Gonds prefer the traditional healers. However, when the condition becomes serious, they approach modern medicinal practitioners. The traditional healers usually treated the common ailments of the villagers in their home setting (Jain, 1981). Some medical practitioners are expert in bone setting, wound healing, poisonous bites, neurological disorders, etc. and some others in spiritual healing through rituals (Jaggi, 1973). Anthropologists are studying traditional medicine in many countries like Africa, Europe and Russia (Paul and George, 1990). China is able to give health care for its urban as well as the rural population by combining both traditional and modern health care system (DHEW Publication, 1974). Attempts are also made to study household remedies from different areas in India, for treatment of similar ailments.

How the traditional healer carries out the healing process differ from society to society. Oftentimes during private healing, only the patient and the health practitioner are in the room. For some, healing practices take place in front of the whole community and often involved their participation. One example is the healing dance of Ju/hoansi foragers of the Kalahari. Several times a month, the healing dance is performed to draw on the collective energy of the participants. Men, and sometimes women, dance around a circle of women who sit around a fire, clapping and singing. Healers draw on the spiritual energy of the dancers and singers to enhance their consciousness. During this period of enhanced consciousness, healers can heal those in need (Miller, 2011).

#### **Land and People**

The Khurkhul village which comes under the Imphal West district in Manipur is one of the largest Loi village located in the valley of the Lamshang Sub Division about 17 km north on the sides of the Imphal-Leimakhong road from the state capital and it has population of 6,450 of which 3,300 are males and 3,150 are females 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 is recorded as 826 which is also 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%. There are altogether 1,344 houses in the village. 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.

Khurkhul, the study site is inhabited by the Lois, the Schedule Caste community of Manipur who have their own preventive and curative measures for health care. There, the traditional healers play important roles in the lives of the people of the Khurkhul village. These traditional health practitioners commonly known as the 'maiba' for male and 'maibi' for female has each cultural roles right before the birthing of a child to the dead of a man and that a local physician 'maiba' can declare dead of a bed ridden patient he is attending and that, when a person dies a normal death at his home, a doctor is not required to be called in to issue a death certificate. In Khurkhul village, the traditional healers hold an esteemed and powerful position. 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. In a village like Khurkhul, traditional healers can play an important and valuable role in helping their community to improve their health and quality of life.

### **Aims of the Study**

The aims of the present study include (i) examination of the traditional concepts of health and illness of the people of Khurkhul while (ii) studying their age old healing systems of different ailments, both ritual and medicinal. Another major concern of the present study was (iii) to throw light on different aspects of their illness, health and health seeking behaviour. From the anthropological point of view, traditional healing practices and beliefs are very much related to one's social and cultural setting. There has not been much systematic study on the Lois people in Manipur, particularly among the Lois of the Khurkhul village. The present work is a comprehensive ethnographic study regarding their health and traditional healing practices.

### **Material and Method**

The present study adopted standard techniques of modern ethnographic research such as observation, case study and interview. The relevant data of the present study were collected from the field site employing standard methods and techniques of anthropological research like, observation, interview, case study, etc. and also from such secondary sources as archives, records and libraries. The village Khurkhul was chosen for the present study considering the fact that it is inhabited by the indigenous people of the Lois of Manipur, which is one of the Chakpa Scheduled Caste communities, who are traditionalist and conservative by nature that follows traditional healing practices till now. This small village has unique culture and lifestyle different from the rest of the Meitei communities. As such their traditional knowledge in traditional health care system is attached with elaborate association of culture and religion.

The primary sources of the primary data collected for the study included data from the traditional health practitioners including the maibas and the maibis as well as members of households aged 18 years and above. Secondary data sources relating to types of treatments and kinds of most common ailments, includes journals both of national and international, magazines, newspapers and census of India 2011. In addition, relevant information from the internet was also included as one of the important primary source. Qualitative data was obtained and analyzed through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Most of the analysis was done by descriptions and explanation to help search for any prevailing patterns in the use of traditional medicine and any other ideas that explains its importance, existence and practices. The responses were remarkable and thus, patterns have been identified by drawing verification to arrive at specific conclusions. During the face-to-face interviews, direct questions were put to enrich the qualitative data analysis.

### **Findings**

#### **• Health**

The Khurkhuls are much concerned about their health. The concept of health among them is not just the mere absence of diseases. This is as reflected right from their personal interactions, for example, the most commonly used words for greetings like 'karam touri' or 'nungairibro' (how are you?), subsequently followed by another words 'ana ayek yaodeko' (is there any 'ana' illness in the body or 'ayek' mental disturbances?) showing their concern towards good health and mental wellbeing. The probable answer to these greeting words from a contented state of being healthy and happy person would be 'nungajari ishwargi thoujaldagi' (doing well by the grace of god). This indicates that there is always harmonious relationship between physical and mental wellbeing to describe a state of good health.

All that activities for seeking good health as well as the treatment of already afflicted ones consists of both modern and traditional medicines. In this regard it is explained that a person is not fully recovered until and unless the traditional rituals of the thawai-mi koukhatpa (i.e. calling of soul) is not performed at the spot where he had met with an accident. Even though the wounds that were mated out during the accident have healed under medication, he or she still expect the mother, sister or the wife or a maiba or a maibi to perform thawai-mi koukhatpa at the spot where the accident had taken place. It is only after this ritual have been performed that he/she feels satisfied and believed that such miseries of accident will not occur again.

A healthy person, as is one who can consume normal amount of food, attend to his/ her daily works including participation in every invitations, that is in the leikaigi thoudok wathok and having full sleep properly in the night. A healthy person with a sound physical body gets up early in the morning, do some physical exercises, worship God (at least for the elderly), does lots of work in the field or home without having any physical constraint and can eat heavy meals without much choice for extra taste. A

healthy person can lead a happy life by following good eating habits. The right foods are the traditional items cultivated without using the present day chemical fertilizers. They fear that the vegetables sold in the market are not the organic products and that is why, not good to eat at all. Local vegetables cultivated by themselves in the village may not look attractive but are the best ones. At the same time they also try to reduce the consumption of salt and the amount of oil. A healthy diet comprises of adequate amount of local rice, vegetables, fish or meat, etc. It is believed that eating the right amount and type of food will lead a healthy way of life.

Health means proper functioning of body and mind. A healthy person cannot be easily infected by evil spirits if she/he has maintained the usual norms and codes of the village. They believed that a person who does not worship the God will be miserable because good health is the outcome of one's pious life and illness is the resultant punishment meted out by the spirits. They think that individual life is controlled by the will of God and that their sufferings have genesis in the deeds of their past life. In every culture, a substantial and integral set of beliefs, knowledge, techniques and practices are related to the major life experiences of health and diseases. They believed that the breach of taboo may also cause illness and affect the health of a person. They also believe that, those who are conducting ancestor worship every year by offering the appropriate tarpana, locally known as the tarpan katpa as filial right will not be cursed by their ancestors who are in the Pralok (a place in the heaven). A neglect of conducting such occasional ceremonies is sinful and that their family members may be attack by the benevolent spirits to cause illness and miseries.

- **Illness**

The concept of disease and illness has been used to capture different aspects of ill health. Disease is defined as a condition that is diagnosed by a physician or other medical expert. This would include a specific diagnosis according to standardised and systematic diagnostic codes. This would in most cases also mean that the specific condition has a known biomedical cause and often known treatments and cures (Hensing G, 1998). On the other hand illness is seen as a rather wide concept. It is defined as the ill health the person identifies themselves with, often based on self reported mental or physical symptoms. In some cases this might mean only minor or temporary problems, but in other cases self reported illness may include severe health problems or an acute suffering that limits the person's ability to lead a normal life. (Idler EL, 1997).

For the Khurkhuls, a person is considered ill when she/he stops eating the regular food and does not carry out normal duties or works and unable to sleep well and becomes weak. Illness behaviour in the village is largely a social phenomenon, that, the patient define the symptoms and decides to consult for the treatment either in the public health care service available in the village or to consult a medical doctor or any of the available traditional healers (maiba or maibi) in the village. The symptom may be defined either from socio-religious or biomedical perspectives beginning with the patient, family members and relatives, and then the neighbours considering all the earlier experiences that have taken in the near past. The symptoms of the illness will decide where to go for the appropriate treatment in priority. There may also be differences concerning for example their focus on medical symptoms or the social consequences for the person in question.

- **Causes of Illness**

The causes of the illness as recognised by the Khurkhuls may broadly be grouped into i) Natural causation, which include infection, stress, organic deterioration, accident, etc. and ii) the supernatural causation, which are considered to be mystical, animistic and magical comprising of the Lai-tin-oknaba (encountering evil spirits), helloi oknaba (encountering wandering spirits), hingchabi changba (evil eye), potsem jadu (sorcery) and mishou changba (witchcraft). They believe that evil spirits like helloi, apumbi soren, ancestral spirits and others that of unnatural deaths are loitering around to cause mental imbalance while there are still people who are capable of instilling evil spirits and omen to cause harm to others with the help of black magic.

Most of the illness that of the Natural causation are treated at the Khurkhul Primary Health Centre located in the village. This include the pregnancy related medication and the child birthing. Still others that require advance facilities of biomedicines are taken for treatment at major hospitals located in Imphal or outside the state as deemed appropriate. But the illnesses concerning with the supernatural causations are still treated in the traditional ways by the traditional healers, the maibas as the diviner, herbalists, faith healers and bone setters while the chabokpi maibi who perform as the birth attendant during child births has changed her role as no birthing takes place at home. She only assists the birthing mother in bathing and feeding during the birth ceremony yupanthaba/ipanthaba or the swashti pujah held

on the fifth day after birth. She also takes part during the house purification ceremony, the yumshengba, which is held after ten days after birth.

- **Treatment**

The first approach of traditional healing process is to identify the cause of the illness. This is done either through kuthi yengba (forecasting the horoscope) by the Pandit maiba or a Panji (a Manipuri astrologer) or the Maibi senhunba which is usually done by a maibi by throwing coins, to perform as a diviner by creating an order of supernatural divination rituals in which she transforms herself into a deep trance. She tries to find out if there were any langjaba, i.e violation of norms and duties while worshipping the supernatural divines or whether there were any semjinba, i.e bewitched by somebody or whether there was some timu-laimu, i.e evil spirits blocking the path.

This is followed by neutralization process known as potsem louthokpa, if suspicion of evil spirits acting upon the patient is detected. The treatment then starts by offering sacrifices to the acting spirit and conducting rituals to appease their anger by a maiba, the male traditional healer who also performs a traditional way of offerings known as khayom lakpa or chaban thaba. The maiba will then sprinkle holy water to ward off the evil spirits with leaves of red cedar locally known as 'tairen'(Cedrela toona, f: meliaceae) and Crow foot herb called 'pungphai' (Dactyloctenium acgypticum, f: cyperaceae).

During such treatments, the family members are always involved and the healing process is facilitated by the broader involvement of several members of their community, the keirol leikai. Here the patient is not considered as an isolated individual and the healer studies the patient as a whole and does not split the body and mind into two separate entities as they believe that there is an interaction between the spiritual and physical well being.

- **Types of Healers**

The traditional healers of the Khurkhul does not all perform the same functions nor do they all fall into the same category. Each of them has their own field of expertise even though they are commonly designated as maiba or maibi. Following are some of the types of healers:

- **Diviner**

A maibi (diviner) is the senior most women who define an illness and its circumstances by letting herself into a state of complete trance called maibi laitongba under which her spell or the prophecy called laiphao will be made about what went wrong in the past due to which the patient is suffering. She also diagnoses bewitchment by throwing ancient coins called maibi sen hunba and makes prediction. Such maibis are called ema maibi and they are highly respected in the community for their mystical power. She may not have direct contact with the patient. Any member of the patient's family may approach her for the diagnosis. She may not have the knowledge of medicinal herbs. Her only specialty is divination where she operates within the traditions of spiritual contact by acting as a medium with the ancestral spirits, ebudhou, the male forefather and ebendhou, the female ones.

Training to become a maibi is not a personal choice but is a calling bestowed by ancestors (ebudhou or ebendhou) to a person who then gets apprenticed to a qualified ema maibi for several months during which she learns to control the trance-like situation of communication with the spirits. She also learns how to throw coins, i.e maibi sen hunba by maintaining proper conducts, dress codes, restriction of food items and relatives.

- **Herbalist**

The use of herbal medicine is common among the people of Khurkhul. It started as home remedy for treatments ranging from small cuts and wounds to stomach pains. But when special attention is required, they would approach the village herbalist who is also called a maiba. This particular maiba (also known as kabiraj) is the one who is specialised in the use of herbal and other medicinal preparations for treating diseases.

He possesses an extensive knowledge of curative herbs and their applications. He does not receive a calling but chooses to become one through training and experiences. One of the maiba, in the village, relies on an ancient manuscript he had obtained from the utra sanglen, an apex body of the maibas of Manipur at the office of His Highness, the Maharaja of Manipur, at the Royal Palace Imphal in which he had been serving as an irat langba i.e preparation for rituals. The manuscript cannot be read by everybody as it is written in old Manipuri scripts.

The herbs are mostly grown in his courtyard or available in the vicinity of the village. Sometimes the herbs may be obtained from the neighbouring hills (i.e. the foothill of Mt. Kounu in the west) or bought from the ema market in Imphal.

- **Faith Healer**

The duty of a faith healer is to strengthen one's faith and will power during the treatment of illness and diseases. This is mostly done through prayer and offering to ward off timu laimu, the evil spirits. In order to please these spirits, the healer maiba prepares a kind of worship, the khayom lakpa or chaban thaba, for offering plantain leaves, rice, eggs and leaves of medicinal plant, langthrei (*Eupatorium birmanicum*). Another ritual known as graha khurumba is also performed for offering food items cooked by the patient's family. In this, the maiba, with his mystical power, forces the patient to spell out what the evil spirit really want to have. After hearing the evil's say, a feast will be arranged accordingly. It may be small or bigger depending upon the number of participants. But the numbers of participants are fixed in odds of three, five, seven, or nine including the maiba and the patient.

- **Birth Attendant**

Traditional birth attendant or the midwife in Khurkhul is called chabokpi who are elderly women. They have no training in the field but possess skill through experience. Before the introduction of modern medicine, the chabokpi handled pregnancy related problems and deliveries. But today, the duty of the midwife or birth attendant has reduced to merely teaching behavioural avoidance among pregnant women, ritual bathing of the mother and child, ritual disposal of placentas and providing traditional massage after delivery. She also takes part in ritual purification of the house after child birth known as yumsengba.

- **Bone Setter**

The bone setters of Khurkhul develop specialty in treating bone fracture and dislocation of joints through experience. In the treatment process, despite the protests from the patients fearing the pain, they twist, pull and poke the arm or leg to locate the exact dislocation or fracture. In case of minor injuries of dislocation and fracture such as the fingers and the toes, the bone setter simply apply sesame oil or animal extract oil into the injury area to give a smooth massage so that the treatment is carried out painlessly in a relaxed condition. To immobilize the area of injury, they tie up short piece of bamboo sticks with bandage. When the injury is in the arm or the hand, a sling around the neck is fixed to be used as arm rest. And in order to reduce the swelling and relieve muscular pain, they apply hot fomentation, higa yeiba by mixing the leaves of a common medicinal plant, hanurei (*Mussaenda roxbughii*).

## Discussion

Just as disease and illness also depend on personal behaviours, the health behaviour also differs from person to person. All that activities for seeking good health as well as the treatment of already afflicted ones consists of both modern and traditional medicines. Modern public health and healthcare system available in the village including the Public Health Centre (PHC), Khurkhul, Govt. of Manipur, which is functioning with a total number of 5 Medical Officers, including one female AYUSH doctor, under the overall supervision of a Senior Medical Officer-in-charge, Dr. Usham Jugindro Singh with the help of 5 Staff Nurses including three ANMs who are working at the grass-root levels in promoting health in the village communities for achieving National Health Programmes, the people of Khurkhul also depend on traditional healers as they are easily available within the village. Familiarity with the healers puts the ailing at ease during the course of investigation and treatment. The traditional healers do not address only physical problems. They also handle psychological and mental problems which are believed to be caused by evil spirits. In such cases modern medicine is not depended upon. It is also believed that illness arises either from supernatural causes due to displeasure of ancestral gods and evil spirits or is the effect of black magic. As the traditional healers are part of the society with good knowledge of culture and practices of the people, they have the ability to understand problems better and give better solutions in the form of medicines or performances.

## Conclusion

The people of Khurkhul are conservative and 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 involvement of social aspects of health, cultural and environmental issues. These understandings will give immense effect in improving the prevailing and advancing medical knowledge to benefit the general masses in particular. It is evident that physical well being and mental satisfactions are two sides of the same coin: one cannot live a healthy life without honouring the mental

aspects. They have their own system of belief, which is deeply rooted in their mental cognition and physical surroundings.

Traditional healers hold an esteemed and powerful position in Khurkhul. 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. In a village like Khurkhul, traditional healers can play an important and valuable role in helping their community to improve their health and quality of life.

The findings of the present study provide a significant contribution to public health research in general and towards studying the traditional healing practices in particular. Further study on therapeutic pluralism of the Khurkhuls is also recommended.

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