

**THE DONYI - POLO CULT OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH
A STUDY IN TEXTUALISING TRIBAL ORAL RELIGION**

By

Ruma Roy (Nee Chowdhury)

THESIS

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INTRODUCTION TO LAND AND PEOPLE

Arunachal Pradesh or the land of the rising sun as it is called, lies on the north-eastern tip of India and covers an area of 83,578 sq.km. It lies between latitudes 26.28N and 29.30N and longitudes 91-30E and 87-30E. This mountainous land is surrounded by China on the north and north east, Bhutan on the west, Burma on the east and the vast plains of Assam on the south. This land of dawnlit mountains, as it is also known, presents a picturesque scenery with green valleys, meadows and mountain slopes, and a number of rivers intersecting. The major rivers flowing through the area include the Bharali river flowing through Kameng district, Subansiri river through Subansiri district, Siang river through Siang district, Dibang river through Dibang Valley district, Lohit river through Lohit district and Noa Dihing river flowing through Changlang district.

Arunachal has undergone through several political changes over the past years. In the early days, i.e. in 1914, this land was familiar to the Britishers by the name of North-East Frontier Tract which during various stages of evolution between 1914 and 1946 was subdivided into Balipara

Frontier Tract, Lakhimpur Frontier Tract, Sadiya Frontier Tract and Tirap Frontier Tract. These areas together with the Naga Tribal areas was subsequently known as North-East Frontier Agency or NEFA in 1951. A few years later i.e. in 1954, NEFA was reconstituted into Kameng Frontier Division, Subansiri Frontier Division, Siang Frontier Division, Lohit Frontier Division, Tirap Frontier Division, and Tuensang Frontier Division. But the Tuensang Frontier Division was separated from NEFA in 1957 and was absorbed by the Naga Hills, while the remaining frontier divisions were transformed into five districts in 1964. In 1967 Panchayati Raj, the traditional council was formed with five (5) Counsellors and twenty-six (26) MLAs. The Agency Council was formed for NEFA as a whole, and it was the highest administrative body. At the district level the Zila Parishad functioned in every district with a Govt. personnel known as political officer, while Anchal Samitis were set up in every village. There, were thirty-two (32) Anchal Samitis in all, with thirty-nine (39) members who were elected bodies. In 1971, Pradesh Council was formed in place of Agency Council.

On 20th January 1972 this land attained the status of Union Territory under a Chief Commissioner, and was renamed as Arunachal Pradesh. The name Arunachal Pradesh was originally suggested by the then Director of Research of NEFA

administration Mr. Bihabasu Das Shastri. In 1975, the post of Chief Commissioner was replaced by the post of Lt. Governor, and a legislative Assembly under the constitution was formed in place of the Pradesh Council which was functioning till that time. With acceleration of developmental activities and the awareness of modernisation in the minds of the youths of Arunachal Pradesh, this land ultimately attained its statehood on 20th February, 1987 and is a full-fledged state with its capital located at Itanagar in the Lower Subansiri district.

Recently, for administrative purposes Arunachal Pradesh has been divided into thirteen (13) districts, and the thirteen districts along with their headquarters are given below:-

Sl. No.	District	Headquarter
1.	West Kameng	Bomdila
2.	East Kameng	Seppa
3.	Lower Subansiri	Ziro
4.	Upper Subansiri	Daporijo
5.	West Siang	Along
6.	East Siang	Pasighat
7.	Lohit	Tezu
8.	Tirap	Khonsa
9.	Dibang Valley	Anini
10.	Tawang	Tawang
11.	Changlang	Changlang
12.	Papum Pare	Itanagar
13.	Upper Siang	Yingkiong

According to 1981 census, the total population of Arunachal Pradesh was estimated at 6,31,839 lakhs. The people are spread over a total of 3257 villages, and the density of population per sq.km. has been calculated to be 8 persons. The scheduled tribes of this region consist of 79% according to 1981 census.

Arunachal has made much progress in the field of education. According to 1961 census, the literacy rate was 7.13%, which increased to 11.29% in 1971, and further increased to 20.09% in 1981.

The climate of Arunachal Pradesh differs greatly throughout the entire state, and is unpredictable. This is because of the rugged terrains and hilly nature of the region resulting in variation of temperature and altitude. The temperature in the low-lying regions fluctuate widely in contrast to the areas lying at higher altitudes.

This land also experiences heaviest showers of the country, with rains lasting nearly the whole year through. The rainy season usually starts from the end of March lasting upto the end of September, June and July being the months of heaviest rainfall. Snowfall is also experienced at high

altitudes ranging from 1,500m and above. This usually takes place in the winters, i.e. between November to March months. The winters are damp and chilly, with the sky remaining cloudy for most of the time, and thick fog and mist envelops the atmosphere. During this time, the temperature ranges considerably in different parts of Arunachal, at times even falling below the freezing point.

Summers in Arunachal Pradesh are short and more or less pleasant with high humidity and occasional showers.

Different parts of Arunachal Pradesh vary greatly in altitude and climatic conditions. As such the entire region is covered with luxuriant vegetation consisting of trees of various size and species, ferns, mosses, algae, fungi, climbers and a wide number of useful plants.

In addition to the above, forests cover most parts of the state forming its greatest natural wealth. It is found that forests cover about 61 per cent of the entire land. Big trees of simul (*Bombes malabaricum*), holok (*Terminalia myrocarp*), oak and pine grow abundantly in the forests. Different varieties of canes and bamboos are also found in this area, and these are utilised for making useful articles

of daily use, like baskets, fishing traps, bags, containers, etc.

Orchids also abound most parts of Arunachal Pradesh, and a variety of about 500 species of orchids are found. With reference to Siang district, the Botanical Survey, Eastern Circle has reported the following:-

'From a general running collection in the region orchid species numbering to 40 and representing 16 genera have been collected From these collections one species is new to the Himalayan region and one Malayan species of *Coelogyne Carneae* Hook f. is recorded from India for the first time'.

Apart from many common species of orchids, some rare species like *Aerides odoratum*, *P. Manii*, *Dendrobium nobile*, and *Vanda coerulea* are also found.

The dense forests of Arunachal Pradesh are also rich in fauna, and exhibit a great variety of wild life. The most commonly found animals include mithun (*Bos frontalis*), elephant, snow-leopard, tiger, black panther, wild boar, barking deer, musk deer, wild buffalo, wild goat, wild cat, pandas, monkey and langur. A wide variety of birds are also

found in this enchanting land. These include the hornbill, kite, eagle, dove, crow, cuckoo, and parrot, pigeon, partridge, wild fowl, parakeet, pheasant, sparrow and swallow. Among the reptiles, the most commonly found are the lizard, cobra, viper, caldus and python. Leeches are frequently found all over the region. A wide variety of insects also infest the nature.

Arunachal Pradesh is also rich in archaeological ruins, and there are a number of places of historical interest in the state. The archaeological sites include those of Itafort located at Itanagar in the Lower Subansiri, Noksaparvat in East Kameng, Bhalukpung in West Kameng, Malinithan in West Siang, Bhismanagar in Dibang valley and Vijoyanagar in Tirap district. The monastery of Tawang is also very famous and is about 350 years old. Another historical site also included the well-known Parasuram Kund of Lohit district which draws a number of pilgrims every year at the time of Makar Sankranti.

This beautiful mountaineous land also serves as the homeland of some one hundred and ten (110) tribes and subtribes. Different tribes inhabit the different districts of Arunachal. These tribes include the Monpas, Sherdukpens, Akas,

Khowas, and Mijis of Kameng district, Daflas (Nishis), Apatanis, Hill Miris, Tagins and Sulungs of Subansiri district; Adis (Padam, Minyong, Pasi, Gallong, etc.), Khambas and Membas of Siang district; Idu Mishmis of Dibang valley, Digaru Mishmis, Miju Mishmis, Khamtis and Singphos of Lohit, and Tangsas, Noctes and Wanchos of Changlang and Tirap districts. All these tribal people have different dialects and distinct identities. They are very hard-working people, and possess a deep sense of beauty which can be manifested in their dances, songs, arts and crafts. The Wanchos, for instance, are very good wood carvers. The Monpa tribes are also very famous for weaving. They weave beautiful carpets which are widely known throughout the entire region.

The tribal people of Arunachal Pradesh are mostly cultivable workers. They practise their traditional method of agriculture, i.e. jhuming or shifting cultivation. In this a lot of land is cleared and seeds sown. This is continuously carried out for a period of two-three (2-3) years after which that land is abandoned and a new fertile plot of land is selected and cultivation works are carried there. Besides this, permanent or settled cultivation alongwith modern methods and implements have also been introduced in some parts of the state.

The people of Arunachal Pradesh are also endogamous. Clan exogamy is the basic rule of marriage which is in practise. Marriages are mainly of monogamous type but polygamy also prevails in some regions of Arunachal Pradesh. Polyandry is never practised at all. Payment of bride-price is an important feature among the tribes.

CHAPTER - II

DISCUSSION

In analysing the religion of the tribal people of Arunachal Pradesh, it is found that Donyi-Poloism is a channel, through which human aspiration and faith which are traditionally cultivated by the Adis, is expressed.

Like anybody else they have to face the realities of life, make sense of their existence as well as of the nature. In search of the answers to their questions and in an effort to find coherence of the total existence, they have discovered the profundity of Donyi-Polo. The supreme qualities of Donyi-Polo are expressed through natural symbols such as the Sun and the Moon. The qualities of which are easily understood and realised. Day in and day out they perform their tasks enabling creatures to make their existence possible. The qualities on which these two powerful symbols are based have to be immutable and universally acceptable.

Thus, traditionally, Donyi or the Sun is considered to be the principal guide of truth and Polo or the Moon symbolises love, kindness, sympathy and compassion. The Adis attempt to accomplish perfection through truth, wisdom and compassion and thus realise Donyi-Polo. Donyi-Polo can therefore, be considered as a philosophy of humanistic faith that is based on natural traditions, ideology of which has evolved out of the belief and practices of the generations of the tribe.

In Donyi-Poloism, the flow of thought is maintained uninterruptedly through direct, personal contacts in which knowledge is believed to be complete and genuine.

It is seen that the Adis are awakening up to their pride in being Adi (the original). They are also trying to rediscover the religion of the Nature. They are interpreting their relationship to the world on the basis of the hermeneutical principles. Thus they cling to the divine universal symbol of the Sun and Moon, which helps to maintain their original identity of the natural religion. As such, a new social order is opening up based on the hierarchy of values of which they apparently had no comprehension before.

In the light of the data presented, the following observations have been made in the context of the objectives that were set for the study -

The strategies adopted for organisation of the tribal oral religion has been to give a call to eliminate all alien beliefs and practices, to revitalise the traditional ritual practices and to produce a new theology.

All these are problematic. The call to eliminate the alien beliefs and practices has no doubt a populist dimension. It is aimed to gather support from within and as well as across groups. The call readily appeals to the emotions of the people and helps in mobilisation. In practical terms the call is a kind

of reaction to what has been going on in the region. Attempts to proselytize people in the region has been going on. Proselytization at one time may have brought a glorified status but that does not work anymore in the changed political circumstances. Moreover, they realise that proselytization does not fit into their way of life and also undermines. Proselytization can be shunned but what about modernisation which is creeping in. All this resulted in their search for a coherent order of values which would be capable of conferring meaning and unity in the society. This they found in Donyi-Poloism. Donyi-Poloism thus became a symbol of their religion and cultural identity. Not that they have been able to resolve all the problems and oppositions, they confront them and as a result of which Donyi-Poloism is continuously evolving itself.

Rituals make the religious faith visible. But in tribal society they are much more than that. Rituals are very closely related with their economic activities, with their social relations and the maintenance of reciprocal behaviour. Besides, the ritual reflect their conception of nature, supernatural and also their values. Moreover, in order to distance themselves from the alien beliefs and practices, their own rituals get more intensively emphasised. In the process the observance of their own rituals get reenergised and revitalised. They became a rallying point. No doubt revitalisation of their rituals in the changed context cannot avoid making use of modern technology. Modern technology is efficient and has a wider reach. But modern technology also brings in new elements. For example, the use of modern means of communication in passing on the messages, in

gathering people and in various activities associated with observance of the rituals is extraordinarily efficient as compared to what it was in the past. The sheer pace by which people can be reached now or brought together breaks the traditional rhythm and put in demand for more physical space and more spiritual information.

These are of course problem areas. But their problem of problems has been how to integrate the rituals with the production of a theology. According to Saraswati the distinction between oral and textual religion are unbridgeable. One is bound by sound, the other by sign, in one transmission is direct and personal, in the other it is indirect and impersonal, in one creativity is involved on each occasion of transmission the other is repetitive. In oral transmission the spiritual power is realised by recitation. While in textual, sign has no power by itself. In oral religion, knowledge is complete and authentic, consciousness sees the spiritual fullness. The written word is incomplete, open to interpretation. The oral is unbounded and immeasurable, the flow is continuous. In written forms the knowledge gets circumscribed and fixed. In oral form the reliance is on self realisation by the collectivity. In written form the reliance is on the other. The expressions are unique and authored (Saraswati 1992). The oral religions by the definitions are enveloped in mysticism which get fully reflected in a variety of their rituals that are observed. Rituals can be performed in the minutest of details - and in perfect sequence but no explanations can be offered. Explanations are in the forms of observing the rituals correctly. This facility tends to get lost in the written

forms. The mystic cloud has to be removed, explanation has to be offered for clarity, understanding and easy transmission. If this be the distinction, the problem before the elites of Donyi-Poloism is what kind of explanation to offer for beating the drum in a particular way, *sacrificing a cock, a pig or a mithun, drinking rice beer, dancing and so on.

These are integral part of culture. In other words the culture and religion are interwoven. They cannot be separated. But this is exactly what the intellectuals of Donyi-Polo faith are expected to do. In order to communicate and enlarge its acceptability, the intellectuals are supposed to put religion in a separate pedestral and to be identified as such, distinct from culture. It has to be in such moral terms that are universally accepted.

Culture represents the basic world view of the people in time and space and it is as dynamic as the society itself. As the society evolves so thus the culture. Since, for whatever reasons, the society perceives that textualisation of their religion is an essential task, culture too has to respond to it one way or the other. Obviously it means that there would be more intensive search of the roots and at the same time what are the new values that can be incorporated in the text that is being developed. The implications that arise from the timeless tribal traditions, breaking in part or in full acceptance of the historical religions are great and complex.

The old elements of the tribal faith are reinterpreted in the new idioms of the historical religions and the old idioms of the tribal religion are reformed by new elements. This is a process of retraditionalisation. But retraditionalisation leads to detraditionalisation which obviously is going to cause ripples in the society. It may destabilise the society to a great extent. There may be strong reasons for the tribal, to react against the new thrusts. In other words what is supposed to unite people may also become cause for disunity. This represent the tussle within the community.

The elites of the Donyi-Polo faith represent only a small section of the ethnic groups of the state, namely, the Adis. Some twenty years back the ethnic composition of this group officially included just two major tribes, The Gallong and the Minyong from the erstwhile Siang district. Today the group Adi represents other tribal groups which were once sub-tribes of either of the major groups - Gallong and Minyong. As such the group today has atleast 11 tribes. Whereas official documents show 110 tribes including sub-tribes in the state of Arunachal Pradesh. (Census of India. Vol. Arunachal Pradesh : 1981). Thus the group 'Adi' envelopes all the sub-tribes of the Adi group and they are substantiating their religion through elaboration of the existing myths in textual forms.

Though the Adi theologians deny their tie with any other religions (like Christianity, Buddhism, etc.), they remain grounded in these religious thoughts. In interpreting the indigenous belief of the Adis, they are looking for the similar-

ities with Semitic religion. For instance, Donyi-Polo has been endowed with such attributes as 'creator', 'almighty', 'omnipresent', 'omniscient', etc. The minority but dominant group even succeeded in getting a bill enacted in the year 1978, providing legal protection to the indigenous faith.

The intellectuals have also taken up issues related to ecology. In order to preserve tribal culture and identity, the preservation of wild life is an essential factor and some of the Adi intellectuals advocated the ban on the sacrifice of mithuns. Oshong Ering suggests the total ban on the sacrifice of animals even on festive occasions. Since he does not want to discourage the spirit of sacrifice, he has suggested an alternative of using symbolic images to substitute the killing of animal. But this may pose problem. The tribesmen are habituated with sacrificing animals during festivals. As such, they may not accept the idea of using symbolic images.

JUSTIFICATION :

The religious intellectuals have provided certain justifications in support of their effort to textualise their oral traditions and beliefs. According to T. Rukbo, there are two crucial factors responsible for this, namely, (a) party politics and (b) alien culture. Party politics has brought about disunity in the society.

Oshong Ering has further provided an explanation of

traditional cultural heritage, that is beliefs, systems, superstitious practices, myths, religious ethics, philosophy rituals, songs, dances etc. which are orally transmitted from one generation to another are there to establish their distinct identity. The people feel proud recalling their past and in maintaining their self-respect and dignity. The Adi intellectuals, therefore, are very much aware of the fact that their myths, folklores, etc. are important not only for sustaining their distinct identity, but are also a great source of their cultural history. So they feel it essential and necessary to textualise and record the oral traditions.

According to Tumpak Ete, with the spread of modern school education which takes children away from the traditional education and way of life, the priestly school of rhapsodists is fast disappearing. The old tales are losing their appeal because of ignorance of their real purpose and new ideas of social order and function. So there is every reason to fear that if these are not written down now, they will be lost forever. Soon there would be none who would know these lengthy narratives.

The above fear has led Tumpak Ete to devote himself entirely to the task of preservation of the cultural heritage of the tribesmen.

In order to promote Donyi-Poloism, some suggestions have been put forward by the various religious intellectuals, which are as follows :-

More books on Donyi-Poloism must be published to create an awareness among the people. According to the leaders these books will definitely provide ample scope for younger educated generation to understand and realise its importance and significance.

Secondly, the people have to develop strength, physical, intellectual and spiritual and harmonise these aspects of strength into one strength. Prayers and group discussions must be held at regular intervals, which bring the community together.

The more developed section of the society, whether in respect of education or culture or wealth, must make special efforts to bring the backward sections at par with them. They must cultivate the attitude that the whole society is like a family and it is the duty to help others. Fourthly, those persons who have left the Adi fold, should be welcomed back into the fold with love and affection and given due recognition and protection.

Finally, the leaders of all clans, cults and sub-tribes have a great obligation to fulfill. They must evolve a few simple social disciplines common to all Adis which can make every Adi feel that he is an Adi and belongs to a great brotherhood of Donyi-Polo faith. This is a programme that deserves serious consideration and implementation by all concerned.