

Chapter 4

Village Religion: Ritual of Illness Practiced amongst the Bhutia (Lhopo) Community of Sikkim

Introduction

Illness (see in glossary) in a Bhutia Lhopo tribal community in Chochen, a small hamlet in East Sikkim with 53 Bhutia household is associated with their social relationship or social interaction with nature, the living and the dead. The shared knowledge amongst the locals with nature or their environment where they consider the rocks, lakes and river streams as sacred and diluting or polluting these sacred places, afflict them with illness and misfortunes and sharing of this world view amongst the people plays an important role in connecting and reconnecting the people with their land and its people. *Bon* shamanic rites and rituals play a significant role in en-shaping the socio-cultural perspectives of the Bhutia Lhopo's life.

In this chapter an attempt is made to comprehend the cultural meaning embedded in illness and how illness experienced is socially shared amongst the Bhutia Lhopos in Chochen. In other words, how meaning and experience of illness is influenced or shaped by cultural and social settings. Therefore, this chapter tries to comprehend how an illness of an individual in the village is socially shared or conceptualized by the local people of Chochen.

This chapter is based on an in- depth interview and portrays the “insider's view” on the causes and diagnosis of illness perceived by the local villagers in a small village Chochen.

Socio- cultural conception of illness

In tribal society, the meaning attached to health and illness experiences are rooted in socio- cultural beliefs. “Culture provides a normative standard for decisions and ways of behaving and it is an important basis for defining health as well as making treatment choices” (McElroy & Jezewski, 2001) (Dixit, Mishra, Sharma,2008:4). Illness in a tribal society is embedded in culture. The causes of illness and its cure are rooted in its social setting. The tribal people believe that if the locals do not confine or confirm themselves with the norms and beliefs of society then they are inflicted with misfortune

and illness. Locals are of the view that if the sacredness of nature is defiled then they will be punished. Traditional understanding of health and illness is embedded in norms, values and beliefs. To quote, Weitz “an illness reflects more than simply the objective nature of the condition or behavior”. “Rather it reflects subjective judgment regarding its meaning” (Weitz, 1995) (Dixit, Mishra, Sharma, 2008:2). Consequently, the illness perceived needs to be looked beyond its objective nature. Over a period of time the subjective meaning attached to the illness might give us fair ideas about how illness is a social construction and how it is socially shared by the locals.

Jezewski (1990) defined “culture as a shared system of learned and shared codes or standards for perceiving, interpreting and interacting with others and with the environment” (McElroy & Jezawski, 2001, 191) (Dixit, Mishra, Sharma, 2008:4). Communities may have their own cultural guidelines related to illness conditions, modes of treatment and decision-making regarding health issues (Kakar, 1977) (Dixit, Mishra, Sharma, 2008:4). As noted by Helman (2001) “culture acts as a “lens” through which people perceive and interpret their world” (Dixit, Mishra, Sharma, 2008:4). “There exists a strong belief in many cultures that illness or misfortune is a result of possessions by spirit, bad deeds of past life, ghost, evil spirit and witchcraft” (Archer, 1947; Jakobson, 1998; Kakar, 1977) (Dixit, Mishra, Sharma, 2008:5).

According to Tylor in 1871, he defines “culture as that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquire by man as a member of society” (Helman, 2007:2). Kessing and Stathern define, “culture as system of shared ideas, system of concepts and meanings that underlie and are expressed in the ways that human beings live”. From this definition one can see that culture is a set of guidelines (both explicit and implicit) that individuals inherit as the member of particular society, and that tell them how to view the world, how to experience it emotionally, and how to behave in it in relation to the other people, to supernatural forces of gods, and to the natural environment. It also provides them with the way of transmitting these guidelines to the next generation- by the use of symbols, language, art and ritual. To some extent, culture can be seen as an inherited ‘lens’ through which the individual perceives and understands the world that he inhabits and learns how to live within it. Growing up within any society is a form of enculturation, whereby the individual slowly acquires the cultural lens of that society. Without such a shared perception of the world, both the cohesion and continuity of any human group would be impossible (ibid).

systematized and symbolic actions which create a new integrative state of mind for the members of the group.

Hence, an attempt is made in this chapter, to understand the meaning of illness through tribal perspectives. So, in this chapter an in-depth understanding of the illness perceived by the Bhutia Lhopo tribe of Sikkim in a, small village named Chochen will be highlighted.

Causes of illness

Illness in Chochen is believed by the locals to be rooted in their social and cultural settings. Illness is feared by the local people of Chochen and consulting Lhopo *bon* shaman and lamas prior to the visit to doctor is necessary for them because according to the local people, it is believed that if the illness is caused by the Nepoh (the supernatural entity who is responsible for inflicting the individual with illness and misfortune) than consulting a doctor may be fatal and futile. Therefore, the villagers initially consult the ritual specialist to find out whether the illness is caused by Nepoh or not. Shamans and lamas might be consulted simultaneously or if former does not work, they consult the latter but people these days give more preference in consulting with the higher Lamas known as Rimponche. Similarly, Paul mentions that among the Sherpas, most diseases are thought to result from having offended or neglected some supernatural being that populates the Sherpa universe (1976:144) (Balikci,2008:120).In Chochen, Illness as perceived by the locals is basically attributed to Nepoh which can be caused by pollution or Drib (Bhutia term for pollution) and polluting the sacred lakes, rivers and rocks where locals believes that local protective deities reside who are considered to be ambivalent as these local deities can bring both fortune if propitiated properly or bring wrath if they are neglected, offended or polluted. Local people are even inflicted with Nepoh like the Shimo and Shinday (it is being explained below).

In Chochen lake or as the locals address it as Pathing cho (lake) resides the serpent deities (local people perceives lu as serpent deities). A study conducted by David H. Holmberg among the Tamangs of Nepal mentions that Tamang perceives lu as a being who live in the earth and are associated with water and imagine them to be amphibian or reptile which human cannot see (Holmberg, 1996, 99). In Chochen eastern part of Sikkim, lu are imagined as serpent deities who resides in huge rocks and it can also be found in water. The lu deities residing in the Chumee (a spring water)

are the aquatic deities who are also imagined as serpent deities. For Gyasumdo Tibetans of Nepal, the *klu* live in a kingdom beneath the earth or at the bottom of lakes and streams, and they also may reside in hearth inside the home. (Mumford, 1990, 94). Thaka Amay lu (lu's mother), Lumay Urung Phuti (white lu), Lumay Sizo Phuti (white lu), Bhuroko {lhu nay sabda (black lu)} are the lu found in Chochen and polluting these sacred areas inflict the people with illness (it is believed by the locals that white lu are benevolent deities whereas black lu are the ambivalent deities).

It might induce the ailing individual with ailment like rashes and swelling and local people believe that if they undergo such ailment than they know that it is because of Lu Nay Sabda, black lu (the wrathful serpent deities who inflict the people). Local people believe that Lu staying in this huge black rock are wrathful and white Lu too who are imagined by the villagers to be residing in white rocks can inflict the people with illness if they are disturbed and the elder's advice the youngsters not to litter the surroundings where the lu resides. Lu are serpent deities, if the surroundings are littered and made dirty, it causes drib or pollutes the lu and it is believed that if the lu's eyes and ears are infected by this drib or pollution, it inflicts the person with the same type of illness. Lu can affect not only the person who is responsible for polluting the surroundings but also to those whose Lungta (a Bhutia term for fate) is weak.

Boroko (the black Lu or Lu Nay Sabda who resides near the Pathing Cho) causes skin irritation. Machong Lama Kincho is also the Lu Gyab (the guardian of Lu). If an individual afflicted from lu, even after propitiating the lu deities is not healed than Machong Kincho the guardian of Lu (Lu Gyab) is propitiated by the shamans. If the illness is caused by Lu the villagers immediately consult the *bon* shamans or the lamas and they believe that it is not advisable to visit a doctor. Lu ngha (chanting of mantras or prayers) is performed by the *bon* shamans and few lamas where they chant mantras and lamas usually perform a Shapten (Buddhist prayers) like Lu-song or Lu-tor to appease the Lu deities.

Likewise, Shemo is caused when an ailing individual is inflicted by the spirits of the dead person and it is believed that Shemo is caused by the dead person who might have died without fulfilling his desires and is still longing to fulfill them by inflicting the people and according to *nejum* a lady *bon* shaman, the Shemo inflicted person would be having a pain similar to the pain which was experienced by the deceased person. If consulted to *bon* shaman, in mohtop (prediction) if it is found that the illness

is caused due to Shemo than, this shemo of the dead person is offered the food and drinks (if the deceased person used to drink alcohol when he was alive). The offering to the dead, if an individual is inflicted by Shemo is even done by any members of the family who knows how to chant the Khelen and he/she does not necessarily need to be a *bon* shaman. He/she says the Khelen by saying that as he or she (the sick individual) is suffering from the same pain the deceased person had endured during his/her last days and request the deceased not to trouble the person who is sick and appeases the dead individual with food and drinks and request him to leave. Khelen consists of four sections, purification, invitation, offering and dismissal (Balikci, 2008: 380).

Senday in a Bhutia Lhopo community is caused by the living person who has negative or evil eye or thoughts. The individual who is affected by Shinday or Senday might experience an ailment like a foul smell coming through mouth and have bloated stomach. Even, among the Bondos highlanders, the notion of evil eyes was used to explain illness “When anyone leads a happy life, earns more or sends children to school, other people in the village become envious. Such envious attitude provokes the neighbours to cast an evil eye. Evil eye results in illness and consequently death”. Such belief is found in other tribal and rural cultures also (Ghosh, 2002; Jakobson, 1998) (Dixit, Mishra, and Sharma, 2008: 17). Ghosh (2002), in the context of Lataifa, Egypt, noted that the envious attitude generally grows in a situation of asymmetry and imbalance in social relationships due to condition of production and change. Even among the Bondos highlander it was found that the envious attitude emerges because of imbalance or unequal social positioning (Dixit, Mishra and Sharma, 2008: 17). Even among the Bhutia Lhopo community of Chochen illness attributed to Shindey or evil eye i.e., emerging out of imbalance and unequal social positioning. *Nejum* also stated that the deities which are invoked during the ritual who are kept in the lower echelons and which are usually placed horizontally in small tables are the Dhay Gays who are considered as the ambivalent deities and they are generally responsible for illness if they are not appeased properly and they are responsible for causing illness to the local people. The different Dhay gay in the altar causes different types of illness and *bon* shamans through Mohtap (prediction or divination) and also by examining the symptoms of the illness of the sick person, identifies which Dhay Gay have inflicted the people. For example, Pay dong Lama Kincho (name of a malevolent deity) is the Nhay da or Nhay Ghay Da-Ku (guardian of illness) he is even known as Lho Cho

Gaypu, Lho Lama Kincho or Duk Gay Cheysung, Rimcha Daku who resides at Algara (Ba-Dum –La) in Kalimpong in West Bengal is responsible for illness in most cases. The individual inflicted by Paydong Lama Kincho suffers from symptoms like swelling of body, feeling of being pierced in the body, headache and fever.

Singibari Dhay Gay (this deity is malicious and it resides below the bridge in Chochen) causes headache and this deity is appeased by offering Kachod (white offerings like the fruits and rice and drinks).

Machong Lama Kincho (this deity represents the Gyempey Daku or the guardian deity of Machong Gumpa) causes unstable breathing and burning of stomach. However, this Dhay Gay is not so malicious as compared to other Dhay Gay.

Cho Ha lha Gapu, Chum Adong Phuti (deities from Ha in Bhutan and in Tibet respectively) causes swelling of body, coughing, vomiting, and diarrhea. These malevolent deities are offered bya- chang (fermented rice), five pieces of pork meat and these deities are even known as Fha k dhay (the malevolent deities resembling pig).

Gensa Kincho causes skin irritation (Gensa Kincho is the Da-Ku or deity which follows the bride to the groom's house, this deity is propitiated by the people who stays in Pheri belonging from Phempu Nadikpa lineages) and if it is not propitiated properly, it might inflict the groom's family or the bride herself.

It is very important to note that in Chochen, establishing the causes of illness through Mohtap or divination is performed by the *pawo* or *nejum* and appeasing of this DhayGay is executed by the *bongthing*.

If the illness of an individual is caused by the Dhay Gay or Nepoh than the allopathic medicine will not be effective in healing the patient, therefore this Dhay Gay needs to be propitiated and appeased for curing or for the allopathic medicine to work.

After diagnosing the illness by Lhopo *bon* shamans through divination or mohtap, they perform the rituals to cure the ailing individual by appeasing the ambivalent deities.

The local people along with the *bon* shamans of Chochen are very afraid to mention the name of the deities which causes illness because this might offend these malevolent deities. They are considered as evil or ambivalent spirits who are believed to be tamed and subdued by the higher lamas or Rimponches and the locals are afraid that if they mention their names, they might be active again and start inflicting the

people. There are respondents in Chochen who are literally against the *bon* shamanic worship and considers *bon* shamanic practices as a demon worshipper {bhoot mansako (which is a Nepali dialect to refer to demon worshipper)} and considers Lhopo *bon* shamans responsible for invoking the malevolent spirits causing harm to the villagers and I agree with Balikci that, it could be the result of the influence of conventional Buddhism which tends to portray high Buddhist deities as the only true providers and protectors capable of offering more than temporary relief from human sufferings. (Balikci, 2008, 123).

In Sikkim firstly with the coming up of Guru Rimponche in the 8th century A.D and again with the advent of 16th Gyalwa Karmapa in 1960's, it is said that many local malevolent spirits have been tamed. Both the Rimponche condemned the animal sacrifice offered to the local deities by the *bon* shamans during their rituals. However, in Chochen it was not until the intervention of the Phulchung Tulku (higher Buddhist Lama) in the middle of 1970s who came from Tibet that the sacrifice of animals was stopped by him and there are many tales of him subduing the local malevolent spirits and are offered Kachod (white offerings like rice and eggs) and stopped the offering of Machod (sacrificing animals).

The above-mentioned deities are the collective representations which are the expression of collective realities perceived by the locals (Pickering, 296). The above-mentioned fact that certain areas in the village are considered sacred and defilement of that location leads to illness or misfortune reflects the social fact or shared worldview of the villagers. The subjective meaning attached to their nature or environment in turn controlled the social actions of the local people and maintained social order in a society.

Case study on Diagnosing the illness and cure for the illness.

These are few cases of diagnosing and finding a cure for the illness suggested by the *bon* shamans which was witnessed during my stay in the field.

Case 1

When a small kid (nephew's son of the *nejum* Tashi) was sick, the *nejum* was consulted and in her Mohtap (prediction through divination) it was predicted that the illness in the kid is caused due to Shemo of long dead cousin and also the ambivalent deities who

stays in the huge jungle and Boksi (a term in nepali) or barmo in Bhutia Lhopo, a type of witchcraft based on envy and she told that this death spirit needs to be appeased by offering the Cha Sur Phe Sur (a combination of champa (roasted and grinded rice), butter and tea leaves which would be burned in the fire) and to change the path which leads towards the *nejums* nephews house.

Case 2

Another case is cow having difficulty when delivering a baby was initially consulted to the village compounder and even after his intervention when medicine was not working the *nejum* was being consulted. And *nejum* after mohtap (prediction) predicted that cow is having difficulty because she is affected by nepoh and the afflicting spirits are the deities who stay in the jungle and suggested the owner to appease them with eggs and needs to propitiate the Phee Ghukhen (Gyab) and Byachang Gay Dhaku(Din)(name of malevolent deities).

Case 3

As the lady of the house living in the Tadong ward had been ill frequently from past three years. She had a stone in gall bladder and operated (2016). She said, in the same month (September2017) she fell sick again so she consulted *pawo* Latuk and Ajo Chagu (a *bongthing*). Ajo Chagu in Mohtop found that they have to appease the ancestral deities' pho lha mo lha. So, a ritual was being performed where (Sha-nga) was offered to pho lha mo lha (ancestral deities).

After that *bonthing* performed Ngha (prayers) in chum (rice) putting Gasee (turmeric) told her to eat and use it whenever she is not keeping well. He was even consulted for mohtap because one of the *pawo* said to the sister of the sick lady that some misfortune like death might occur in Daw Geypo and Gupo (8th and 9th month of the lunar calendar), she was really afraid and asked Ajo Chagu to check whether it is true or not, but Ajo said after mohtap (divination) not to worry and assured them, nothing is going to happen, if any misfortune occurs, he will be held responsible.

Case 4

Another case was of a girl who was studying in class eleven had been sick for several years and her body trembled and she hissed like a snake and all the family member thought that she might be possessed by some serpent deities or lu. They consulted most

of the higher lamas and even consulted bon shamans. The *pawo* asked the family of the sick child to perform bon shamanic rituals. The *pawo* performed an Ata Gokap (see in glossary) ritual to diagnose her illness and during ritual it was found out that the Shemo of her paternal grandmother was affecting her who was also a shaman but she was officially not recognized as shaman as her husband was an orthodox Buddhist lama and did not believe in traditional shamanic rites and rituals however this dead grandmother already has her dungee (her disciples).

He was an uncle of the girl who is presently sick. Ana Zamyang (deceased grandmother of the sick girl) is the Kabab (it refers to spiritual ancestors of which the *bon* shamans may or may not be related) of the *pawo* Tanding and during the Ata Gokap ritual when the girl was possessed by the deceased Ana Zamyong, she said that as her dungee is not performing the rites properly and she wants another dungee to propitiate the ancestors. And finally, it was decided that as the sick girl's uncle is already initiated shaman, he should be allowed to perform the ancestral shamanic practices as the girl is still studying and will be married someday and hence, will not be able to perform or continue the ancestral rites and rituals. Therefore, negotiation rituals were held where all deities were invited in the altar along with Ana Zamyong and the deal was negotiated. A Shanga was offered to cure her illness.

From the above-mentioned cases it can be understood that illness in Chochen and its adjoining areas is a social construct. The social and cultural meanings are attached to illness. When an individual become sick in the village the locals consult *bon* shaman. They even consult *bon* shamans whether to show doctors or not, whether allopathy medicine will work or not. Thus, Illness in the village is not just attributed to scientific reasons but to other social causes which is rooted in the society and there cannot be no other better consultant than the *bon* shamans who are the specialist who knows best regarding the diagnosis and cure for illness in the village.

Conclusion

Sociological concept of illness gives a fair idea about how individual in a society share a common social and cultural meaning embedded in illness. According to Kapferer, illness demonically conceived is not reducible to terms independent of demonic conception.... [and] is above all a socio-cultural construct to be understood first and foremost at this level and in its own cultural and social terms (Kapferer,1983:87)

(Balikci,2008:122). Similarly, in Chochen too, the illness needs to be understood in its own cultural and social terms. Therefore, illness in Chochen is not just comprehended at scientific level but it is also rooted or embedded in cultural and social conditions. The world-view shared by the local people through internalization or attaching subjective meaning to the objective reality where local people believe that their surrounding is inhabited by different local deities who are capable of bringing both fortune and misfortune, health and illness portrays the social and cultural connotation attached with the social well-being of the village. Further, bon religion and its rituals which are embedded in its cultural roots are the collective representation of the beliefs and religious practices which are symbolized in the form of deities (benevolent, malevolent or ambivalent) manifested externally during rituals which the locals believe are the protective deities residing in different corners of the village.