
A Study on the Belief System of Adi Minyong and Lushei tribes of Northeast India

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ABSTRACT

Every tribal around the world have one thing in common and that is a system of belief in a supernatural power, a spirit – benevolent and malevolent, spirits who bring misfortune and blessings, etc. Just like so, *Adi Minyong* and *Lushei* who inhabited the North eastern part of India have their own methods of worshipping their gods. They are surrounded with a multitude of nature deities who played an important part in their day-to-day life. This idea of polytheism pervades through every facet of their lives; manifesting in the form of rituals, be it agrarian rites, sacrifices, festivals, funerals and illness. Since there are no written records which can served as an evidence for the origin of their beliefs system, their beliefs system are totally based on oral and myths which had been passing on from generation to generation. Here we will try to analyze and compare the differences and similarity between the *Adi Minyong* beliefs system to that of the *Lushei*.

Keywords: *Adi Minyong, Lushei, beliefs system, gods, spirits, nature worship.*

Introduction:

Tribal religious beliefs system often are more or less similar round the world as they mostly consisted of gods and goddesses, spirits of different kinds, ancestral worship, etc. *Adi Minyong* is one of the tribe from Arunachal Pradesh and *Lushei* are from Mizoram. Although some of the *Lushei* tribe lived outside of Mizoram still majority of them lived within Mizoram. Both the tribes have belief in the existence of a supreme being who is responsible for the creation of everything. They both held the belief that every part of nature, like mountains, rivers, lakes, forest, etc has their own guardian spirits, either malevolent or benevolent. Both tribes have similar rituals aimed at pleasing such spirits.

Adi Minyong:

Origin

There is no evidence of written records for the origin of religious beliefs of *Adi Minyong*. Their religious beliefs system is totally based on myth and from that it is known that since earlier times, *Adi Minyong* tribe has no particular religion and any religious places to be named [1]. Their religious life centres around the ideas of polytheism as we have mention earlier and they are surrounded with multitude of nature gods and goddesses and spirits who had influence over their everyday life [2].

Creation Myth

In the beginning there was emptiness ‘*Keyum-Kero*’ and only *Sedi* and *Melo* were there. *Sedi* being the Earth mother and *Melo* being the Sky father had many children and they stressed till horizon where they meet each other [2]. According to the myth, human being were the last to be created by *Sedi Melo* out of *Eling* (stone) in which they put different organs which physically appeared as two sexes, i.e., male and female. These first human are called *Litung* (male) and *Limang* (female). Both the name of male and female starts with *Li* as it stands for *Eling* (stone). Then human ‘*Litung*’ and ‘*Limang*’ had children and their two elder sons – *Nibo* (man) and *Robo* (giant) always had quarrels with each other regarding the properties. So they had a competition and since *Nibo* was clever than *Robo* he won most of the competition and became the winner who

took over land and *Robo* had to lived in the jungle forever [3].

Donyi and Polo

After *Sedi Melo* created everything – human, animals and every living things, the earth was still covered by water and there was no place for their children to live. So this let them to create *Donyi* (sun) and *Polo* (moon) to dry the land to form a place where *Sedi Melo*'s children would live. According to the myth initially there were two *Donyi* – *Bomong* and *Bo-o* and there exist no concept of time and as such, people of those period had to work endlessly. *Etu Tigling* (one type of frog) got fed up of it and shot *Bo-o* with its arrow. Although the arrow did not kill *Bo-o*, he was badly affected enough that *Bo-o* became *Polo* (moon) [2]. *Donyi Polo* was created by *Sedi Melo* to dry water in order to form land for the children of *Sedi Melo* and they are given responsibility to look after their children. This is how *Donyi Polo* became the guardian of all the living ceatures.

Later, many other deities came into existence – *Kine Nane*, *Doying Bote*, *Gumin Soyin* and *Pedong Nane*. It is not clear as to how these deities came into existence but some have the opinion that it may be an imagination of the people through their daily life experience and their everyday life with nature. What we should know is that *Minyong* beliefs are superstitious and all the deities they believed in are connected with their economy. And as it passed on from one generation to the next it automatically became part of their beliefs system.

Other deities

Adi Minyong tribe has many other deities as we have mention above viz. *Kine Nane* – goddess or spirit of the underworld, *Doying Bote* – god of wisdom, *Gumin Soyin*-goddess or spirit that live in *Dere* (community hall) or in house, and *Pedong Nane* known as the mother of human being [3].

Controversial belief in supreme god

Sedi Melo is the creator of everything according to the *Adi Minyong* myth, but *Donyi Polo* is generally accepted as the supreme being in their pantheon [3]. So, there is no clear

teaching as to who is the supreme being among the *Adi Minyong* but one thing that is clear is that they have conscience that there is one supreme being who looked after everything and who is responsible for creating all living and non-living things in this world.

Spirits

Adi Minyong like any other tribes strongly believes in the existence of spirits who dwells in various places. They believe in two types of spirits called *Uyu*. An *Uyu* may be benevolent or malevolent. Benevolent spirits are those kinds of spirits which are desirable to the human being due to their positive involvement in their life while malevolent spirits are the ones who causes harm even to the extent of death. The benevolent spirits are worshipped with sacrifice out of free will and with the hope of getting blessing and security. Offering of sacrifices can be done separately by a family for their own or as a community or by the whole village for their prosperity. But if displeased, the spirit even the benevolent ones can cause problems in the family or community even to the point of taking their life.

Benevolent Spirits

Different types of benevolent spirits are as follows:

- 1) *Agam Uyu* – Blessing spirit, especially all the living things owned by the family have are all counted under the blessings of this spirit
- 2) *Gamyang Uyu* – They are also a blessing spirit but a bit different from *Agam*. All the dead animals and birds, that are killed from hunting are considered as blessing from the spirits.
- 3) *Mopun* – This is the spirit of land.
- 4) *Gumin Soyin* – This is the spirit who brings blessing upon the family and takes care of all items of house.

These are the benevolent spirits whom the *Ai Minyong* had worshipped for prosperity, fame, security and blessings [1].

Malevolent Spirits

In the traditional belief of *Adi Minyong* there exist multitude of malevolent spirits, they are as follows:

- 1) *Urom* – Spirit or soul of a death person that used to trouble human being.
- 2) *Epom* – According to the traditional myth they are giant who were once the brother of man.
- 3) *Asi Among* or *Sili Sidong Uyu* – Spirit of land and water who attack human if they don't like their action e.g. throwing stone, cutting tress, taking things from forest or water.
- 4) *Taleng Uyu* – They are the spirit of those who die of unnatural death like suicide, falling from tree, accident, etc. They lived above the land or sky.
- 5) *Nepong* – They are the spirit of a female who died at young age mostly below 40 years.
- 6) *Meju Meya*- They are the spirit of bone and it causes trouble to the people who used to hunt and killed wild animals.
- 7) *Nyme Nyipak* – They are the spirit of granary who could cause stomach trouble.

The above spirits are the ones *Adi Minyong* had worshipped out of fear as they could cause a lot of trouble for their family as well as for their community/village [1].

System of Worship

Adi Minyong are known to be the worshipper of *Donyi Polo* (sun and moon) but actually they worshipped the spirits, both the benevolent and the malevolent as they think that the spirits are the one who really indulged in their day to day life. They also have many other deities besides that of *Donyi Polo*, however they are not the one they worshipped. Among the benevolent spirits *Agam Uyu* is mainly worshipped as this spirit is a blessing spirit and is mostly done for the blessing of wealth and in this sacrifice they do not need *Miri* (Priest) and the mother of the family performs the sacrifice. But if it is in the case of sickness the *Miri* (Priest) is needed who will tell the necessary offering and perform the sacrifice too. Sacrifice was also done to the malevolent spirits but not in a willing and respectful ways.

The main reason they worshipped malevolent spirits is to remove troubles and sickness. *Minyong* people usually do this in order not to trouble people and taking matters into their own hand. So they try to plead the spirit to accept their sacrifice and to leave them alone. *Donyi Polo* although considered to be supreme god finds a few mention of worship in the traditional myth of *Adi Minyong* tribe but it was used for oath and cursing others.^[1] This means that the name *Donyi Polo* was used by people for cursing or for proving oneself of their innocent.

Lushei:

Supreme Being and other benevolent being

The *Lushei* like *Adi Minyong* does not have any written records to use as evidence but according to their traditional belief system there is a supreme god who is responsible for creating everything in the universe known as *Pathian*. He is known to be a good and benevolent being who has little concern with men's affairs [4]. However his aid is often sought in situations where all else has failed. According to A.G. McCall, *Lushei* tribe naturally believed in the existence of one supreme god, a god of all humanity and goodness [5]. According to the *Lushei*, *Pathian* needs no sacrifices or offering given to him and he can be approached with an empty hand by anyone, without the assistance of an intermediary, like *Sadawt* (priest). People are responsible for their own action as he is the judge of human both in life and after death [6].

Like *Adi Minyong* tribe, *Lushei* also believed in other benevolent being whom they worshipped too. *Pu Vana* who is considered to be the grandfather in *Pathian* family [7]. *Khuanu*, who is sometimes conceived as identical to *Pathian* and is used in poetry as a synonym of *Pathian*. *Vanchungnula*, literally means lady from above/heaven, is credited to be the bringer of rain when she poured her vase full of water from heaven to earth.

Huai/Demons and other spirits

To the *Lushei*, *Huai* or demon played far more importance in their day-to-day life than *Pathian*. These *Huai* who have inhabited every mountain, forest, lakes, etc have been attributed to have been the one who cause all the misfortune and illness of their life. *Sadawt* (priest) was to be

consulted on what to sacrifice for their problems. *Lushei*'s whole life is spent in propitiating these *Huai* [4].

These malevolent spirits need to be appeased by offering sacrifices for recovery from their sickness or misfortune [8]. *Lushei* word for to describe such sacrifices is '*inthawina*' meaning 'ceremonial cure', and they do this for the purpose of healing from the illness. *Liangkhaia*, one of the *Lushei* historian believed that the religion of the *Lushei* had its origin in the consciousness of their need for deliverance from physical illness and other misfortune that had befallen upon them which they attributed to the malevolent spirits [9]. *Saiaithanga*, another *Lushei* historian states that, "*Lushei* religion is simply a worship of *huai*/demons." [10].

According to A.G.McCall, there were around fifteen known *Huai*/demons who were of outstanding importance in the *Lushei*'s day-to-day life. Those inhabiting forests are known as "*Ram-Huai*" and those *Huai* in springs are known as "*Sih-Huai*". *Lushei* believed that *Huai*/Demons comes in various shapes and sizes, some resembling humans, others huge and of tall stature, even above that of humans in height. Some have their eyes vertically oriented, they may have massive curly hair or some with just one leg with the ability to grant any wish of one desires. But *Huai*/demons have the ability to take on any form or shape and there is no definite shape or size to their form. Besides this, no one has ever seen *Huai*/demon in their supernatural setting and if ever someone claim to have, then his/her story is discounted [5]. The reason why they discounted their story was that it was usually an account from a dream or a kind of secret disclosures made by those who claim to have made contact with *Huai*/demons. *Huai*/demons lived in different places according to *Lushei* which includes high mountain, caves, under water, large rocks, holes in the earth, springs, lakes, and sometimes large trees.

Some *Huai*/demons were more harmful than the others some are important ones like:

- 1) *Phung* – *Phung* is a large and black *huai* who was believed to have the power to inflict madness and seizures upon its victims.
- 2) *Khawhring* – A *huai* who could inflict such sorrow/misery upon its victims. A person cursed by *Khawhring* could have his/her spirit/soul ruined who would then be known as the one who possessed an evil eye.
- 3) *Hmuithla* – A forerunner of death who would hover round the house where death was approaching. *Hmuithla* would give out an eerie noises not usually heard by the people.
- 4) *Pheichham* – A hasty one leg demon who is known to have the ability to grant wish of a person who have caught it. But in meeting its wishes there is always a price to pay for, often a sinister one. *Pheichham* is so hasty that if one is to caught it then he have to spilled out what he wishes immediately and if he can't do it immediately *Pheichham* would depart provokingly calling and teasing on how slow he is.
- 5) *Maimi* – This *huai* is a hypnotiser and also cause trouble (sleep paralysis) during sleep.
- 6) *Rawt* – a frightener, who used to frighten people.

- 7) *Taumeichher Chhi* – The *Lushei* version of WIL O the wisp.
- 8) *Chawm* – The instigator of crab poisoning.
- 9) *Tauluhik* – A *Huai* who would skin the head of his victims.
- 10) *Khawmu* – A *Huai* responsible for kidnapping human.
- 11) *Dengsur* – A *Huai* known for throwing stones at people.
- 12) *Sihhuai* – A *Huai* responsible for causing sickness through an innocent and clear looking springs. There is a special sacrifice for this spirits which they offered with animals for propitiation of the spirits. *Lushei* sometimes set traps around the springs when they offer special sacrifices to the spirits and they would utter no unusual sound and do nothing to interfere with the capture of the approaching animal.
- 13) *Hautaii* – A mischievous demon known to specifically target women as this demon is the one who cause wood loads to topple over, basket to fall, rice to overboil, things to get lost and many other minor negative inconvenience. The only way to propitiated *Hautaii* was to make a chair or dandy fit for *Hautaii*'s mother to ride in.

The above demons are some of the important demons that *Lushei* had. These demons are more malevolent towards the people [5].

There is a female spirit who is of utmost beauty to those who have seen her known as *Lasi*. She is the guardian of all the wild animals. Those who try to attain the title of "*Thangchhuah*" always search for *Lasi* as in order to attain this title, one has to hunt down multitude of wild animals which was considered to be impossible and once *Lasi* enter the heart of the hunter, success would be unquestionably be attained. She is reputed to have lived in high hill and mountain of *Lurh* and *Tan*.

A part from the benevolent and the malevolent being, there is a spirit known as *Khuavang*, who again is spoken of as somehow identical to *Pathian*, but is inferior to him and also is more concerned with human being [4]. *Khuavang* is believed to be a benevolent being and it was to *Khuavang* that *Lushei* used to pour their hearts out for comfort and protection.

There are another two spirits called *Mivengtu* (watcher of men), one spirit who guard people and have positive impact in their life while the other spirit always try to sell human to the *huai*/demon. According to them each person have two '*thlarau*' or souls, one who is wise while the other foolish and it is the effect of these two *thlarau* that causes that results in the person's outward actions [4].

Ancestor Worship

Lushei strongly believe that the spirit of their ancestors are still lurking around and need to be propitiated. One of the principle of "*Thangchhuah*" feast is in the honour of their ancestor spirits known as "*Mithirawp lam*". At every feast or sacrifice a small portion of flesh, rice and *zu* (local brew beer) is placed on a shelf under the eaves for the spirits of the dead members of the family known as "*rao-chhiah*" [4]. A little of the first fruits of each crop is always placed

on the wall under the eaves as an offering to the cultivator's parents known as "Mithichhiah".

Conclusion:

The way how the gods and spirits had been worshipped by *Adi Minyong* and *Lushei* shows many similarities as both had offered sacrifices mostly to the spirits especially to the malevolent ones as they feared for their misfortune and illness. Although both belief in one supreme being who is the creator of every living and non-living things they did not give much attention to the offering or sacrifice to him. This maybe because both *Adi Minyong* and *Lushei* considered the supreme being to be needing nothing from them as he is omnivolent.

As Christianity captures the hearts of *Lushei* after the advent of the British, they soon discarded their belief system in their nature god and spirits. Illnesses which they previously believed to have been caused by *Huai/Demons*, could be cured by the modern miracle of science and medicine and soon the indigenous belief system of the *Lushei* came to an end. But till today, when a *Lushei* heard a thunder roaring he will say in humorous tone, "It must be *Pu Vana* who makes that sound by dragging their family big dining plate" or when it started to rain, "*Vanchungnula* must have poured her vase of water again". So, they somehow keep the flame burning for the next generation to know a little bit of their culture and tradition. *Adi Minyong* on the other hand, since the last decades of 20th century exist a massive revival under the guidance of late *Talom Rukbo*; the founder of the new religion, *Donyi Poloism*. It is somehow identical to *Donyi Polo* belief system of their ancestor except that it had a well written record to it. They were totally against the Christian missionaries as they are foreigner and since the Hindu missionaries were backing *Adi Minyong* it resulted in failure to established a solid Christian population for the Christian missionaries.

Lushei and *Adi Minyong* though initially have a similar belief system in the way they offer sacrifices to their deities but they ended up differently as one hold on to their traditional belief system and the other accept change.

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