

## EXPLORING PLURALISTIC HEALTH CARE SYSTEMS AMONG THE SUMI NAGAS IN NAGALAND

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*Traditional healing practices have long been an important part of Sumi Naga Culture. Historically, these practices evolved to address the challenges posed by their environment which seemed unknown and dangerous before they came in contact with the outsiders. In contemporary times, the Sumi Nagas have adopted both traditional healing methods and modern medicine leading to Pluralistic health-care systems. In the era of modern science and technology, the Sumi Nagas have also been influenced by modern medicine but their traditional healing practices are not lost. The present study is carried out to explore the interface of traditional healing practices and modern medicine among the Sumi Nagas in Nagaland. An interview schedule method of data collection was used to collect first-hand information from traditional healers and knowledgeable people of the Sumi community.*

**Keywords:** Traditional healing, pluralistic, modern medicine, Sumi tribe, Nagaland.

**I. Introduction**

India has a rich history of diverse traditional medicine systems. We will find a wide range of healing practices including Ayurveda, Unani, siddha, Homeopathy etc in India. These practices focus on balancing the mind, body, and spirit to prevent various diseases and promote wellness among the people. In contrast, modern medicine has a more diseased focused approach using new technological advancements to diagnose and treat specific conditions. Among the Sumi Nagas of Nagaland, both traditional healing practices and modern medical approaches co-exist. These two systems form a pluralistic health care system that addresses the community's diverse needs. Indigenous knowledge systems, including traditional medicine often cannot be verified through modern scientific criteria as each knowledge is built on distinctive philosophies, methodologies, and criteria (Sengupta, 2019). Over centuries, every culture had developed a \\system of medicine (Siegerist, 1987).

Anthropological studies of medicine as a social institution have shown that every human society has developed, according to premises implicit in its own culture, a system of values regarding health and diseases, as an also method of coping with them (Hasan, 1975). In the integration of early cultures, ancient medicine was the mother of science and played a large role (Dubos, 1969). Traditional medicine is considered as an oral tradition purely empirical in nature as it exists in all tribal communities. Indigenous medicines primarily respond to people's health problems, their illnesses, and diseases, as it is a set of concepts of health and illness that helps in reflecting certain values, traditions, and beliefs based on the people's way of life, or culture (Segesmunido, 1994). To understand the role of traditional medicine in a society, it is crucial to first grasp the concept of health and illness. In many communities, when a person falls sick, it affects his or her entire social networks. The decision about seeking treatment from either a local healer or a medical health professional is decided collectively. The concept of good health and bad health differs from society to society and also from individual to individual. For instance, mental health issues in some societies, especially in urban areas are viewed very seriously and therefore the patient has to undergo different therapies to improve their psychological and emotional well-being. However, in simple societies, when a person is not mentally and emotionally stable, stressed, or anxious, they seek the help of traditional healers like prayer warriors, spiritual healers, or priests as they believe that sickness is mostly caused by supernatural forces, spirits, and demons. Illness in every society can be placed under two categories which are the

Personalistic system (active intervention of an agent like human, ghost, ancestor, or evil spirit) and the Naturalistic system (illness or disease thought to stem through the environment resulting in cold, heat, wave, dampness), (Foster 1976). Modernization and Globalization has brought new growth and development in health care systems in Nagaland. Health problems that were unable to be treated by traditional medicine have been eradicated through modern medicine. Though modern medicine has reached every nook and corner of Nagaland, traditional systems and practice of traditional medicine has not been diminished as it is deeply rooted in people's culture. Thus, indigenous health system is coexisting with modern medical systems. Most of the communities today are following the pluralistic system of healthcare.

Nagaland is home to different ethnic tribes inhabiting different towns, districts, and villages. They have a very rich history and cultural heritage. They follow both indigenous and modern systems of healthcare as the interface of the two systems of healthcare has tremendously contributed and helped them to lead a healthy way of life. Before the advent of Christianity in Nagaland and the influence of modernization and globalization among the Nagas, they did not have much contact with the outside world and most of them relied upon traditional healers as the healers nurtured and maintained the health situation in their state. Traditional healers among the Sumi Nagas helped in evolving a medical tradition which was suitable and accepted by each and every member of the community. During olden ages, Nagas worshiped nature. The religion of Sumi Nagas was labeled as "Animism" by J.H Hutton in his book "The Sema Nagas" 1921 as they were superstitious and believed in supernatural beings. They connect mental illness with demonic possession, evil influences, poison, and curse. People in traditional societies often believe in different evil powers which they consider as the sources of health and illness. In order to cope with such disturbances, they take help from a medicine man. Traditional healing in Nagaland have seen a resurgence as it continues to provide effective solutions for different health issues, especially for minor illnesses. Till today, traditional healers still remain the first point of contact for the Sumi Nagas living in areas where modern medical facilities are mostly out of reach. These contacts can be narrowed down to healers like bone setters, traditional birth attendants (in some small villages) and spiritual healers. The advancement in Modern medicine has contributed tremendously to the healthcare system in their state but indigenous knowledge has not been diminished and the traditional system of healthcare is still valued and practiced as it is deeply rooted in their indigenous identity. After the conversion to Christianity and influence of modern education among the Nagas, the Sumi Nagas were introduced to other forms of medical healthcare and also Indian systems of medicine which resulted in rich medical pluralism (traditional and modern) in their state. At present, both traditional medicine and modern medicine play an equal role in Nagaland and contribute towards restoring the normal machinery functioning of the human body when a person is ill. Sumi Nagas follow both indigenous and modern medical health-care therefore leading to a pluralistic system of healthcare.

## **II. Literature Review**

The concepts of etiology of disease in tribal communities are always broadly divided into two types of causations i.e, natural and supernatural. "Different cultural factors like religion, social status, relationship with fellow members of the society, nature of the relationship with the supernatural world, etc plays a decisive role in the evolution of the concept of etiology in a tribal society" (Boban, 1998). The World Health Organisation (WHO), estimates that 88% of the world's population still rely on traditional medicine. Pharmaceutical formulations are based on natural products by 40%. Traditional medicine consists of health practice approaches, beliefs and knowledge incorporating medicines, spiritual therapies, plants, vegetables, animal based, mineral based medicines which are either used alone or in combination to treat, diagnose, and to prevent illness (Craffert 1997; Toit 1998; WHO 2004). There is no doubt about growing awareness of the fact that traditional knowledge systems can contribute to acceptability and coverage among the

population (Delgoda et al, 2010). The treatment seeking behavior differs from society to society and therefore there are chances that we may not find similar health systems in different societies. The Bhotia tribe inhabiting in a village called Mana in Uttarakhand seek the help of the allopathic doctor first in case of any kind of sickness but when the medicines prescribed by the allopathic doctor does not feel satisfying enough, they visit their village priest who is known as the 'puccher' and is believed to have supernatural powers to heal the sick (Samal et al, 2010) . In Japan, the traditional medicine is known as Kampo and recent studies have found that kampo is used daily or as a preferred medication by the Japanese population. Kampo is used along with radiotherapy or chemotherapy in treating Cancer patients which indicates that modern medicine can be well integrated with Traditional medicine (Watanabe et al, 2001). Seeking treatment also depends on the sickness level of the individual. There are some patients who prefer to seek the help of traditional healers before, during or after treatment by a modern doctor (Kale, 1995).

Healthcare facilities are extended to all the people living in a society with equal access to health care needs. However, different societies have different health systems that include their culture, their perspectives about health and illness, the way they define good health and bad health, diagnosis, healing, traditional healers etc. The interaction of cultural values and norms on health-related issues and how the medical practitioners have started using anthropological data to understand their multicultural patients have been a point of focus for many anthropologists (Hahn and Inhorn, 2008). In sub-Saharan Africa, most of the residents prefer to visit the traditional healers for their healthcare needs and refuse any medical treatment until and unless the treatment is sanctioned by their traditional healers. Therefore, medical doctors have also started recognizing the potential of traditional healers in sub-Saharan Africa, most of the residents prefer to visit the traditional healers for their healthcare needs and refuse any medical treatment until and unless the treatment is sanctioned by their traditional healers. Therefore, medical doctors have also started recognizing the potential of traditional healers (Gruca et al, 2014). Health seekers in medically pluralistic societies have varieties of options to choose from like the physicians, spiritualist, pharmacist etc. as per their convenience and whether to choose a medical practitioner or a traditional healer depends from person to person.

Modern medical practices and traditional health practices have a separate and alternative system of health care (Gould, 1957). In India, traditional systems of medicine like Ayurveda, Unani, siddha, Sowa-Rigpa, Yoga including homeopathy are popularly followed. At present, it is important to bridge the gap between western and indigenous knowledge systems in order to improve health research and outcomes.

### III. Methodology

This study explores the coexistence and interaction of traditional healing methods and modern healthcare systems among the Sumi tribe in Nagaland. The study was carried out among the Sumi tribe inhabiting in Zunheboto and Dimapur districts of Nagaland. Purposive sampling and Snowball sampling was used to select the participants for the study. Purposive sampling was employed to select the participants with specific knowledge of traditional healing practices. While, Snowball sampling helped to recruit more participants with similar knowledge. The sample consisted of traditional healers and knowledgeable elders from the selected districts. Traditional healers were chosen based on their extensive experience in healing physical and mental illness, with a focus on those with at least 10 years of experience. The healers were predominantly male. Knowledgeable elders were primarily of 50 years of age and above. They were chosen based on their cultural knowledge and involvement in community health practices. Primary data for the study was collected using semi structured interviews with traditional healers and knowledgeable elders. The interview schedule was designed to capture both the personal experiences of the participants, as well as their views on the integration of traditional healing and modern medicine in their society. The interview schedule consisted of both close-ended and open-ended questions. Open-ended questions helped to explore particular themes such as the reasons for preferring one

system over the other, the role of community trust in healthcare decisions and the safety and efficacy of traditional healing methods. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants prior to interviews. The participants were asked to sign the Informed consent form before starting the interview. The informed consent was obtained to respect the norms and cultural sensitivity. This helped in ensuring voluntary participation. Participants were informed about the purpose and objective of the study, as well as their right to confidentiality and anonymity. Telephone interviews were also conducted with sumi elders who were geographically isolated. The interviews were conducted in local language (sumi dialect). The participants were encouraged to speak freely about their past experiences with traditional healing and give their opinions on the integration of traditional healing and modern medicine. The data collected through the interviews was transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. The themes were derived from the data and organized accordingly to answer the research question. All the data were anonymized to maintain confidentiality.

Table 1 presents a geographical outline of the research areas, specifically Zunheboto and Dimapur districts of Nagaland, which were selected for their significance within the sumi community.

Table 1: - Geographical Outline of the study areas (Zunheboto and Dimapur districts of Nagaland)

#### IV. Results and Discussion

##### **Concept of Health and Well-being among the Sumi Nagas**

Among the Sumi Nagas, health is understood as a holistic state encompassing both physical and mental wellbeing. This concept reflects their values, beliefs, traditions, culture, and their way of life. For the Sumi Nagas, good health is defined as the balanced state of mind and body. If a person eats healthy food, sleeps on time, exercises daily, and stays connected with God at all times, they can lead a healthy life and there will be absence of any infirmity and weakness in the individual. The Sumi Nagas place great importance on consuming fresh vegetables harvested from fields. They believe that vegetables sold in the market are infused with chemicals and are harmful for the body. Health for them is linked to proper diet, exercise, and sleep. Traditional healing among the Sumi Nagas involves the preparation of remedies from local plants, roots, barks, medicinal leaves, fruits, and animal derivatives to some extent. Healing rituals are also employed sometimes to invoke the intervention of supernatural forces but most of the healing rituals are done by the traditional healer. In order to treat common natural illnesses like fever, cold, cough, diabetes, diarrhoea, allergies etc, the Sumi Nagas either consult a medical doctor or use home-made remedies. Whereas, illnesses that are caused by supernatural forces can only be cured by a traditional healer. The health care activities are often embedded in their traditional beliefs, folklore, customs, taboos, prescriptions, and these are enacted through family networks, health roles, healers, shamans, priests, medicine - man etc (Jamir, 2019). The concept of health stands at the core of the social values of human society because they express many of our fundamental assumptions about the meaning of life and death, and address the basic vulnerability of all human existence (Turner, 2013). The culturally considered illness in personalistic domain among the Sumi tribe are 'Mhzamhza' (loss of spirit and soul), 'Tu-uli' (visitation of the dead in dream and sleep), 'Alosukusu' (illness afflicted by curse), 'Tughu' (illness afflicted by poison, charms, spell etc) and lastly the satan / devil possessed (Zhimo, 2018). Disease and Illness caused by natural forces like cough, fever, cold, stomach pain, body ache, cramps, dysentery, cuts, wounds, boils, allergies, malaria, gastric, menstrual disorders are either treated by self - medication or with the help of modern medical practitioners. Other physical health problems like fractured bones, pregnancy, nerve pain, muscle pain, body strains etc are treated with the help of traditional healers like bone setters, nerve and veins experts, and midwives etc.

#### **Supernatural Beliefs and their Impact on Health and Well-being**



The strong belief in religion and religious healers like prayer warriors, spiritual healers, faith healers and priests lead to seeking personalistic intervention among the Sumi. In sumi society, traditional healers are generally considered as someone who are gifted with wisdom and strength by almighty and possess broad knowledge about their indigenous healing systems. Traditional healers treat the sick with locally available medicinal plants and also act as the mediators between men and the spirits. The Sumi Nagas have strong faith in their religion and try to invoke the presence of God in their day to day lives. If a person meets with a road accident, he will seek treatment from modern medical doctors but will not be considered fully recovered until and unless the family comes together in prayer (also seeking the help of prayer warriors) to retrieve the lost soul of the victim which was lost at the time of the accident. As Christians, the Sumi Nagas believe that no healing can be received without the protection and help from the Supreme power "Alhou" (Almighty). The "Pukhukibe" (strong faith) in one's religion provokes the ill person and his family to seek help from "Aghungu Shikipiviko" (spiritual healers). Gratitude and thanksgiving are paid to God first when a person succeeds in his ongoing treatment. Initially, all the members of the family come together in prayer when a family member is believed to be possessed by evil spirits, poisoned by another person through witchcraft or sorcery, or is believed to have lost his / her soul and spirit. However, if they are unable to control the possessed person, they take the help of spiritual healers who are considered strong spiritually. Most of the spiritual and faith healers use prayer as a tool for the treatment. They start by asking strength and wisdom to God and rely on vision and prophecies.

### **Traditional Healers and their Role in Health Care Practices**

There are different kinds of traditional healers among the Sumi tribe who continuously contribute towards the well-being of their community through their services. The traditional healers are categorised according to their specializations. Traditional healers like herbalists, bone setters, traditional birth attendants, nerve and vein experts, massagers etc are responsible for treating illnesses that come under the naturalistic domain. Whereas healers like spiritual healers, faith healers, diviners, prayer warriors and priests are responsible for healing illnesses that come under personalistic domain. The traditional healers try to build a rapport with their patients by spending time with them, interacting with them and understanding their health problems.

Herbalists make use of various medicinal plants to treat both physical and mental illness in their state. Majority of the herbalists have a backstory of how modern medicine could not treat their illness (Skin diseases in majority) and that led them to take the initiative to start creating their own versions of local medicines by making use of various medicinal plants that are found in their vicinity. However, it does not mean that they have lost faith in modern medicine. Herbalists have a cure for illnesses like leprosy, kidney failure, diabetes, jaundice, cold, fever, etc. Traditional healers specialized in treating nerves and veins "Akughunami" believe that modern medicine can treat every illness except severe nerve and veins pain. They are of the opinion that medicines cannot penetrate inside our nerves and veins properly and therefore it can only be treated by massaging. While spiritual healers believe that persons who have been possessed by demonic spirits, poison, bewitching, and victims of "Apu Asu no ghime" (ancestral punishment) can only be healed through performing various rituals and prayers. According to them, modern medicine might not be able to treat mental illness caused by unknown forces.

### **Traditional Healing Techniques used by Traditional Healers**

Traditional bone setters treat musculoskeletal problems and fractured bones with oils, ointments, and medicinal plants. They start by massaging the fractured area after applying oils to their palms and heating them over a fire. To resize the structure of the bones, they use bamboos. They may also mash medicinal plants and apply its juice on the damaged area and cover it with a cloth for three days. However, this depends on the type of bone fracture. According to traditional bone setters, mild injuries can take at least 1 week and a half to heal. While, serious injuries can take two to three months to heal.

In case of pregnancy, the women may seek the help of both "Apunu Kujumi" (traditional birth attendants) as well as modern medical professionals. However, the social and economic background of the pregnant mother plays an important role when it comes to the choices of delivery. At present, majority of the sumi families prefer to give birth in hospitals rather than at home. However, there are still some families that seek the help of traditional birth attendants especially in rural areas. Traditional birth attendants check the position of the fetus and predict the gender of the child. During home delivery, they used sterilised scissors or a blade submerged in luke warm water to cut the Umbilical cord.

For mental health concerns, family issues, employment difficulties, spiritual or religious struggles, and bewitched by others, individuals often turn to spiritual healers for guidance and support. Spiritual healers guide them through prayers, bible verses from the Holy bible, Visions and prophecies. Some of them also ask their patients to perform various healing rituals. Spiritual healers guide their individuals in identifying the root causes of their illness. They determine whether the cause of illness is the result of evil influences, ancestral punishment or bewitching by others.

### **Integration of Traditional Healing and Modern Medicine in Sumi Naga Healthcare**

Traditional healers are of the opinion that the collaboration between traditional healing methods and modern medicine can prove to be more beneficial for people rather than simply depending on one type of healing system. However, most of them have claimed that they do not require any formal or additional training to keep their traditional healing knowledge alive as they believe that the ability to heal any sick person has been bestowed upon them as a gift from God and therefore no modern training can benefit them in any way. While, other members of the Sumi community are of the opinion that traditional healers require formal training and should also try to collaborate with modern medicine in order to avoid any complications and side effects. Safety measures such as maintaining hygiene and sanitation during the healing process are crucial for preventing infections. Moreover, they believe that any form of formal and additional training can educate the traditional healers and help them to deepen their knowledge of herbal remedies and treatment while being aware of potential risks.

The traditional healers among the Sumi tribe play a major role in the community's health-care system as they preserve age-old knowledge of herbal remedies and rituals that are deeply rooted in Sumi culture. Their role is significant especially for health issues perceived to have cultural or spiritual origins, and their practices contribute to community cohesion. Simultaneously, the integration of modern medicine has gained prominence due to improved accessibility and evolving healthcare infrastructure. The coexistence of traditional and modern medicine reflects the Sumi tribe's adaptability and willingness to embrace both approaches, ultimately contributing to more diversified healthcare options and improved healthcare outcomes within the community. The treatment seeking behaviour among most of the Sumi Nagas living in rural areas has always been influenced greatly by financial status, illiteracy, seclusion superstitions; many people seek divine intervention through prayers with the help of spiritual healers who have the ability to see visions and prophecies of both good and badomens. This way, instead of taking help from modern medical practitioners they simply approach religion. All the traditional healers of the Sumi tribe work for the betterment and social upliftment of their community. With the dawn of scientific research and advancement of medical technologies, there has been a paradigm shift of treatment seeking behaviour from primitive shamanism to a more sophisticated health care among the Sumi tribe. The traditional healing practices and modern medicine both play an important role and go hand in hand in the Sumi society. Some of the participants have also said that we need to have faith in the treatment we are undergoing either through modern medicine or traditional healing methods as it is only through faith a person can be healed.

### **Change And continuity in Health Care Practices among the Sumi Nagas**

Different factors like economic, religious regional and financial issues play a major role in influencing the choice of an individual while seeking treatment. The Sumi Nagas inhabiting remote hilly areas have less access to modern healthcare facilities as they live far away from main towns like Dimapur and Kohima. The high cost of medicines, hospital bills, transportation problems, fewer health care in district hospitals etc., also contributes to inability of basic health care needs among the Sumi Nagas who inhabit in rural areas. The obvious social factors, like education, employment status and income level of different Sumi families, have marked an influence on how healthy or unhealthy a person is. It is a fact that there is always a higher risk of poor health when the individual's socio-economic condition is low. The indigenous health system is still widely practised, acknowledged, and supported by the people in Nagaland. They still have faith in old traditional ways of healing and value traditional healers. However, it is also evident that the health structure in Nagaland is now influenced by modern medicine, as it is growing rapidly and is accepted by all the Nagas as a whole. There is an existence of a dual healthcare system, and it has a significant effect on the health practices among the Nagas. Nagas who have moved away to urban areas have attained formal education, acquired new skills, and adapted values and norms of others. Traditional healers often complement modern medicine and play a vital role in health care management in Nagaland;; however, there is a need to strike a balance between preserving these cultural practices and ensuring that they do not hinder the evidenced medical treatments." Esternbio medicines and Indigenous traditional healthcare systems have different concepts and practices and run in parallel, sometimes together and sometimes in opposition" (Laura and Bishop, 2000).

## V. Conclusion

The findings of the present study do not claim to represent the entire Sumi Nagas of Nagaland, as the data was collected from a specific sample. However, this study provides valuable insights into the persistence of traditional healing among the Sumi Nagas. Though modern medicine has reached different parts of Nagaland, the intimacy they share with the traditional healers eases the healing processes during the course of discussion and treatment, which has always been a major reason for many people relying on traditional healing. The traditional healers also take various mental illnesses into account which are believed to be caused by evil spirits and therefore modern medicine does not help in healing such circumstances. However, it is important to study and understand the characteristics of traditional healers and try to unfold the entire relationship they have with modern medicine as traditional healers among the Sumi community are also influenced by modern medicine.

The concept of illness and good health among the Sumi tribe plays a major role in their choices of treatment--seeking behaviour. At present, it is obvious that people seek allopathic treatment for their various ailments as long as they can afford it also keeping in mind the fact that medical doctors are professionally trained unlike the traditional healers. The advancement in medical science and increase in knowledge among the Sumi Nagas led to changes in their belief system. According to the Sumi Nagas, modern allopathic medication provides faster relief and is more reliable and safer as compared to traditional healing systems, as it is based on extensive research, tests, trials, and errors. However, in spite of the changes that took place among the Sumi Nagas in terms of health-seeking behaviour, there is a strong prevalence of medical pluralism. It is always the choice of an individual to decide whether they want to take treatment from a traditional healer or modern medical practitioners depending upon the availability of money, PHCs, hospitals, and the right medication. This present study found that though modern allopathic medicine is preferred at large by most individuals now, traditional healing practices are still going hand in hand with modern health care practices. Traditional herbs and medicinal plants are still used for minor ailments like burns, allergies, colds, cough, wounds, and, stomachaches. The therapy and medicines used by traditional healers are however not pure in nature anymore as most of it is blended with modern scientific methods. Though traditional healers still remain the first point of contact for many people especially when it comes to minor ailments,

they have not been recognized as legitimate practitioners yet. The efforts of organisations such as NETHA (North East Traditional Healers Association), along with NSTHA (Nagaland State Traditional Healers Association), attempts to promote the dying folk arts of traditional community healthcare service providers, and through their first TCHP (Traditional Certified Healers Programme) they certified 26 twenty-six traditional healers from the state of Nagaland, out of which 14 healers were certified from Dimapur and later 12 healers were certified from Tuensang. However, the formal integration of traditional healers into the main stream healthcare system still remains a debate for many people. Therefore, in order to understand the nature of healthcare and also the place of indigenous systems in healthcare among the Sumi tribe, good research and further studies are needed in order to evaluate and arrive at a specific understanding of dual healthcare practices among the Sumi tribe. Also, policy initiatives and awareness programmes are much needed to facilitate recognition of traditional healers, their accreditation, and licensing so that the integration of traditional healers among the Sumi Nagass into the formal structure of the health care system will be possible.

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