



Medical Anthropology and Healing Through Orality: A Study on Kapherem

Bhattacharjee S* and Banerjee S

Department of Anthropology, Nagaland University, India

***Corresponding author:** Somenath Bhattacharjee, Professor and Head, Department of Anthropology, Nagaland University, Nagaland, India, Tel: 8777796831; Email: somenath@nagalanduniversity.ac.in

Mini Review

Volume 7 Issue 1

Received Date: January 09, 2024

Published Date: March 06, 2024

DOI: [10.23880/aeoj-16000227](https://doi.org/10.23880/aeoj-16000227)

Abstract

Every culture, irrespective of its simplicity and complexity, has its own beliefs and practices concerning diseases. Every culture evolves its own system of medicine in order to treat diseases in its own way. Northeast India and particularly Assam is a rich zone of ethnic diversity and the Karbis are the early settlers of Karbi Anglong. They can redress their ailments through different medicinal plants which are available in their locality and forest, and also through rituals like se karkli and vorkamatha and also by an art of chanting known as Kapherem. Kapherem is the process where they heal the illness like Gastritis, infection, fractures and also to ward off the malevolent effect by chanting. It is an oral tradition which is being carried forward through generations. The present paper will discuss on the importance of Kapherem (chanting) related to various health issues and treatment of various malevolent effect of the Karbi people. Data were collected through empirical fieldwork by applying appropriate anthropological research methods.

Keywords: Culture; Illness; Sickness; Orality; Kapherem

Introduction

Medical Anthropology

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has defined health as a 'state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity' (WHO; 1948). Medical Anthropology is a new area of specialization within Anthropology. Medical Anthropology is not really a sub-field (like Biological Anthropology, Archaeology, Cultural Anthropology or Anthropological Linguistic), partly because these sub-fields generally have central theoretical paradigm. Medical Anthropologist uses a wide variety of theoretical perspectives, and they do not agree on which ones are best. Therefore medical Anthropology is simply the application of Anthropological theories and methods to questions of health,

illness, medicine and healing.

According to Medical Anthropology quarterly all inquiries in to health, disease, illness and sickness in human individual and populations that are undertaken from the holistic and cross-cultural perspective distinctive of anthropology as a discipline- that is, with an awareness of species, biological, cultural, linguistic and historical conformity and variation. It encompasses studies of ethno medicine, epidemiology, maternal and child health, population, nutrition, human development in relation to health and disease, health-care providers and services, public health, health policy and the language and speech of health and health care.) The concept of health is part of a tripolar conceptualization, as the term denotes:

A balance state of body mind and divine soul that may be elaborated as:

- Body [Physical health- Health]
- Mind [Mental health- Happiness]
- Soul [Social health- Atma- invisible organisation that operates body and mind] [1].

Disease according to modern science is only a departure from state of health and more frequently, a kind of disturbance in the health of body to which any particular case of sickness is attributed.

Sickness is an inclusive term that includes all unwanted variations in the physical, social and psychological dimensions of health. Robert Hahn defines sickness as “unwanted conditions of self or substantial threats of unwanted conditions of self” [2]. These conditions may include “states of any part of a person-body, mind, experience or relationship”. More specifically, the criteria that people use, when they assign the term sickness to a given state is based on complex interactions between human biology and culture. Sickness can be further divided into two basic categories: illness and disease. Disease refers to the outward, clinical manifestations of altered physical function or infection. It is a clinical phenomenon, defined by the pathophysiology of certain tissues within the human organism [3]. Illness on the other hand, encompasses the human experience and perception of alternations in health as informed by their broader social and cultural meanings. From the patient's perspective, however an illness experience may include socio-cultural as well as physiological processes.

Ethno-Medical Approaches

Promoting the need of Ethno-medical science, Horacio Febrega defines Ethno-medical Inquiry as “the study of how members of different culture think about disease and organize themselves toward medical treatment and social organization of treatment itself” [4]. As a domain of enquiry, Ethno-medical research is as broad as the discipline of anthropology. Generally speaking medical anthropologist studying Ethno-medical systems have focused on five major areas of research: ethnographic description of healing practices; comparison of Ethno-medical system; explanatory models of health and sickness; health seeking behaviors; and the efficacy of Ethno-medical systems [5].

In the simplest sense, all ethno-medical systems have three interrelated parts: a theory of etiology (causation) of sickness; a method of diagnosis based on the etiological theory and the prescription of appropriate therapies based on the diagnosis. For getting a comprehensive idea about ethno-medical approaches it is needed to highlight the dimension of traditional Indian Medicines and its diversified

applications among the different communities.

Critical Medical Anthropology

In the context of medical pluralism, clinicians can elicit the person's explanatory model of his or her sickness rather than memorize the details of specific ethno medical belief system [6]. An explanatory model (EM) is a personal interpretation of the etiology, treatment and outcome of sickness by which person gives meaning to his or her condition. Although EMs are personal, they are also learned cultural models, so that an EM shared by a group might be considered a folk model of disease. These models constitute health belief systems that, from cross-cultural perspective, generally fall into two categories: personality belief systems: that explain sickness as the result of supernatural forces directed at a patient, either by a sorcerer or by an angry spirit; and, naturalistic belief systems: that explain sickness in terms of natural forces, such as the germ theory of contagion in Western biomedicine or the imbalance of humors in many forms of Chinese, Indian and Mediterranean systems.

Some critical medical anthropologists influenced by the work of postmodern thinkers such as Michel Foucault [7], have challenged the medical anthropological assumption that western biomedicine is an empirical, law governed science that is unbiased by its own cultural premises. They point to the assumptions and generalizations underlying the theory and practices of western medicine, which have been historically exempt from cultural analysis in medical anthropology. Critical medical anthropologists have thus proposed a new paradigm that views sickness not just as an isolated event but as a product of complex interactions involving nature, society and culture.

Kapherem: An Oral Method of Healing

The Karbi Anglong District is situated in the central part of Assam. Karbi is a tribal group and they were the early settlers and numerically dominant ethnic group of the said region. To study the indigenous knowledge of health disease and treatment of the Karbi people, intensive field work has been conducted in different parts of Karbi Anglong district from January 2023 to May 2023. The studied areas are one of the oldest settlements of the Karbi people [8].

Kapherem: Healing Through Orality

The Karbis believe in many deities and regard all objects on earth as having divinity or possession of supernatural powers. They believe that the diseases are caused by different malevolent spirits and can be redressed by appeasing the benevolent spirit. The disease condition or the notion of illness is being referred by the Karbis as *sekelong*,

when a person falls ill, for example after coming from the forest the household members attributes the cause due to the encounter of evil spirits and initiates propitiations of the spirits. In case the patient does not respond to normal traditional treatments, the household members seek the advice of wise man through divination identifies the deity/spirit responsible for the illness and suggests certain rules of recovery of the patient, this act of divination is called sang kelang [9].

The knowledge or the ability to treat a person's illness or sickness by chanting called as Kapherem, which is a kindmagico-religious healing. In Kapherem, a cure for certain keso(pain or illness) is sought by performing healing chants involving external application of saliva of the mouth (kehi/kangthok) and mild blowing of air (kebut) on the afflicted portion of the body. Kapherem is performed for the cure of numerous pain or keso. Kapherem is performed for the cure of numerous pain or keso such as they categorized it under the following heads:-

- KelokKeleng: broken bones, sprains and fractures.
- Baapkecholong: consumption of poison or evil eye.
- SingjamRamaha: Cough and cold.(Occurs mostly when bogori blossoms)
- Apokanat: Gastritis and stomach ache.
- Ingthuk: Urinary infection.
- Ingthum: Boils.
- Moklangkave: not having mother's milk
- Ingkiangmi: skin infections
- Mekberkebut: Eye infection, conjunctivitis
- Methan- mengKekor (Dog-cat bite)

Under those heads, the Kapherem is done by the practitioner, which is based on rules and regulations which are to be maintained by both the healer and the sufferer (patient) which is called as Poromputhi. Again all the chants and intone are based on the origin and development of the creation myth called as keplangkephie.

When a person suffers from something, Kapherem is one of the ailments, as they sought for, they go to the practitioner and consult with him or her. Kapherem can be practiced both by the male and female, it is an oral tradition which is being passed down through generation. The words which they chant are called as porom. They may also use some other things like water, oil, mud, cowrieshell, thap (fermented rice cake), bamboo etc. to accompany with the chant. For kelokkeleng, i.e. for fractures and sprains they mostly use mustard oil, massages it gently on the affected area accompanied with the chant, For Mekberkebut the practices used to blow air softly in the eyes by chanting the porom simultaneously, there is a very interesting story about how Jangreso treated the king's daughter, when none could cure the princess of her eye infection, thus winning her hand for marriage and becoming the king's heir. Baapkecholong is the most feared ailments

and the most cases found by the practitioners, baapliterally means grass, so it means consumption of grass, it is not the common grass that is found in the yard but it means poison, there are two types of Baapi.e the akethi(dead) and Akereng(live ones), it is said that Baap is a kind of poison which they feed to their enemies in order to kill them, some uses it for their personal gain, Tekeangmum(tiger's whisker is considered to be the most dangerous one) and is said could be only treated with tekeachulang. It was found that diseases like headache, stomachache, vomiting is supposed to be cured by arjangaphelo (alkali prepared from young stems of bamboo), injuries caused by cut through bamboo can be redressed through a charm called kaiphoKapherem In order to treat skin infections i.e. Ingkiangmi (Caterpillar's fur) the practitioners uses Hilongarbi i.e. the vermin compost, they make a ball out of it and roll it on the infected portion accompanied by chats. They have different timings and duration for different ailments and different procedures, for curing same kind of disease, the procedure may be different, according to type they have learnt from the forefathers or Kuru. I found eight such cases mostly children below ten years of age. It was found that all of the people who had undergone this treatment have been cured successfully [10].

They do not charge any fees for this type of treatment, they only accept whatever is given to them by the patient, it may be a small sum of money or a bottle of her (country liquor) as a form of honour called as maan. The practitioner learnt if from their kuru orally and for that they must offer a banta which consists of five betelnut, 5 betel leaf, bongkorok and arak as a form of fees and a mark of respect. Some of the practitioners inherit the art of Kapherem by birth, it is also believed that if a person whose birth was a footling presentation (born from the leg first), then he or she is capable of healing sprain and fractures through his/her touch.

If in case a person is suffering from the infection of insect (Ingkiang mi), a traditional healer prepared from mud to accompany with charm or 'Kapherem' before applying to the patient. These objects are believed to have been placed in the person's body by supernatural intervention.

Kapherem or charms has oral history called 'tomo' dealing to ailment or illness. Each ailment has a folk story that recalls the ancestors' history 'Temokangthum' or 'porom, saabkangthum' in order to cure the physical health and mental disturbing. The traditional healers being required the knowledge of charms or 'Kapherem' to deal with such ailment. After preparation of the material objects, the traditional healer involves the incantation of holy verses.

After the completion of certain charms the traditional healer spit in the mud (made it in a round shape) and applied

on the pained. Firstly, water is pour into the mud until it turn into soften. Secondly, the soften mud is used to make it in a round shape. This mud is applied on the patient physical pain.

Use for male: In a day it is apply two times, that is morning and evening and each single time used of mud was taken six pieces.

Use for female: In a day it is apply two times, that is also morning and evening and each single time used of mud was taken five pieces.

➤ Osoahop: Cotton thread is tied in the Finger ring (made from brass metal) or Arnankeet and that is kept inside the pot for a few minute while it is charm, after that the thread is tied on the neck of a new born child. A drop of water is applied on the waist, hand and wipe on the face.

The Karbi traditional healers have a variety of roles, including: providing strong spiritual and social support;

determining the ultimate cause of a serious illness or injury and also to remove the evil influences causing illness. Like the others tribal groups in the world, the Karbi people has their own traditional healer are held in high regard. A traditional healer can be either male or female healer in Karbi society, healing is done by 'Kurusar' priest and 'lunsepi' female priest. The traditional healers have their own knowledge and power that can be cure to the people. For 'E bang- arpum' body 'Keso' ailment or illness, a treatment was done through chanting like charms 'Kapherem' that involves the incantation of holy verses to cure a physical and mental health ailment or illness. The following are some of the material objects used as medicines used by Karbis for the following ailment or illness. If in case a person is suffering from the infection of insect (Ingkiang mi), a traditional healer prepared from mud to accompanied with charm or 'kapherem' before applying to the patient. These objects are believed to have been placed in the person's body by supernatural intervention.

S. NO.	Name of the ailment or illness	Part of the material used	Application
1	Oso Ahop	Water, finger ring(made brass metal) and thread	Thread is tie on the neck of a baby
2	Birsi	Water and seeds(master oil)	Applied on the lip
3	Pok-vai	Seeds (Rice)	Eat
4	Haek- mesek	Water and seeds (rice)	Eat and drink
5	Chule pen chukhang	Seeds (Rice)	Applied on the breast feeding
6	Ingthum	Water or lime	Applied on the boil
7	Bangaram	Master oil	Applied on the injury
8	Barsopangthuk	Water	Drink
9	Sor	Ginger	Applied on the waist
10	A mek-keso	Blow	Eyes
11	Amek- a dukjangthot	Blow	Eyes
12	Ingkiangmi	Mud	Applied on the pain
13	Cherot- aak	saliva and blow	Applied on the wound
14	Ri- Kengchinglok	Seeds (Master oil) and stem of bamboo	Fracture
15	Tehang- keso	Powder (Ash)	Applied on the forehead
16	Pok-keso	Root (Turmeric)	Eat
17	Okangsu	Saliva and blow	Applied on the neck
18	Bab- kecholong	Rice, liquor, betel nut and betel leaves	Eat, drink
19	Ingsukedong	Master oil	Applied on the leg
20	Pokchokor (bot)	Water or cool	Apply on ribs

Table 1: Different materials used in different ailments.

Source: Field work, 2016

Kapherem or charms has oral history called 'tomo' dealing to ailment or illness. Each ailment has a folk story

that recalls the ancestors' history 'Temokangthum' or 'porom, saabkangthum' in order to cure the physical health and

mental disturbing. The traditional healers being required the knowledge of charms or 'kapherem to deal with such ailment. After preparation of the material objects, the traditional healer involves the incantation of holy verses. Here is what' traditional healers charms related to infection from insect 'ingkiangmi through chanting-

Urmi pen, durmi pen
 Ingkroi pen' ingthe pen
 Saab kangthum e-g, phongingthum e-g
 Urmi a long nang dun, durmi along nang dun
 Ingkroi a long nang dun, ingthe a long nang dun
 Saab kangthum e-po, phongkangthum e-po
 Athokora, bathokhora, rolallibatot jai
 Lahelahe, maatipai Pinso along pinde le
 Baasikot, baagirong, arnisimaahade
 Varputisaapphongmaani
 Porommaani, puthimaani
 Saab kangthum a phi, poromkangthum a phi,
 Puthikangthum a phi
 A bit chelutde, abaatchelut de
 A bit kangsam de, a baatkangsam de
 Nongve pen apara, saab pen a para
 Saab Mani, porommani de

After the completion of certain charms the traditional healer spit in the mud (made it in a round shape) and applied on the pained. Firstly, water is pour into the mud until it turn into soften. Secondly, the soften mud is used to make it in a round shape. This mud is applied on the patient physical pain.

Male: For male child it is used to wipe six times to cure such kind of illness.

Female: For female child it is used to wipe five times.

- Birsi: This is also kind of boil on the lip 'angtur-kangpoppap'. Water along with the master oil is applied on the lip in order to cure the ailment.
- Pok- vai: This is a kind of stomach ache, after her delivery lot of pain remain so in order to cure traditional healer takes little amount of rice and this rice is given to the patient to consume.
- Haek-mesek (chest pain): The Karbis prescribes little amount of rice and sum amount of water is given to the patient.
- Chule and Chukhang: Chule is the infection in the breast feeding mother, they prescribes little amount of rice to apply on the breast.
- Ingthum (boil): the Karbis used either water or lime, that depend on the healer which they prescribes the best to cure the boil'.

Kapherem is a process of oral healing to certain critical ill health condition, where the cause of diseases are more

supernaturally influenced. Being an oral tradition needs the gradual learning and it's practice. It has generated a placebo effect in the psychology of the patient and their family members. Here both the patient and healer, belong from the same ethnic and cultural background. Thus the patients have a deep psychological faith on the traditional healers to get fully recovered from their ailments.

Concluding Remarks

The belief system of the Karbis is intimately related to their culture. They depend on the traditional healers for their concerned ailments or illness. The Karbi people used those material objects in accompanied with 'Kapherem' or charms, which involves the incantation of a holy verses in order to cure the patient. Even today, the Karbi people still follow the traditional health treatment for a specific ailment, across generations. It may be said that Kapherem has a very important role in the concept of health and diseases of the Karbi people, they go to the practices for all major ailments. The art of unique treatment is indeed very effective and the Karbis have been practicing it since ages. It is the magic in orality for which they could not only treat their diseases and ailments but is also preserving its stories and art of healing and also the perfection is maintained. This remarkable chant has been passed from generation and generation orally. It is in this little tradition that keeps the Karbisto trace the tales of their forefathers.

References

1. Chaudhuri B (2003) Health, Forest and Development: The Tribal Situation. Inter India Publication.
2. Robert HA (1995) Sickness and Healing: An Anthropological Perspective. Yale University Press, pp:1-321.
3. Brown PJ, Jessica G, Bruce B (1997) Culture, Ethnicity and the Practice of Medicine. In: Stoudemire A (Ed.), Human Behaviour for Medical Students, New York.
4. Fabrega H (1971) Medical anthropology. In: Siegal BJ (Ed.), Biennial review of anthropology. Stanford University Press. pp: 1-2.
5. Banerjee BG, Jalota R (1988) Folk illness and ethnomedicine. Northern book center, India.
6. Brown PJ, Ronald LB, Mark BP (1998) Medical Anthropology: An Introduction to the Fields. In: Brown PJ (Ed.), Understanding and Applying Medical Anthropology, Mayfield Publishing Company, California.
7. Foucault M (1990) The History of Sexuality: An

Introduction. Vintage, New York.

Medicine. Banarasidas Bhanot Publishers, Jabalpur.

8. Millard AV (1992) The Anthropological Analysis of Health. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 6(1): 3-5.
9. Park K (2000) Park's Textbook of Preventive and Social
10. Merrill S (1989) The Coming of Age of Critical Medical Anthropology. *Social Science and Medicine* 28: 193-203.

