

SYNCRETISM AMONG THE *TAGINS* OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO *DONYI-POLOISM*

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The present paper discusses the indigenous identity based on religious faith called “Donyi-Poloism” of the tribal community of *Tagins* of Daporijo in the district of Upper Subansiri of the state of Arunachal Pradesh in India. The author describes the origin of Donyi-Poloism and how it has been influenced by three other religions, namely, Hinduism, Christianity, and Rangfraism (as a religious persuasion). The traditional religious institutions of *Nyeder Namlo* and *Youth Namlo* are discussed. Based on a cross-cultural comparative analysis of different religions currently co-existing among the *Tagins*, various similarities and dissimilarities among them are explored.

Keywords: Donyi-Poloism, Christianity, Hinduism, Rangfraism, syncretism

India is one of the largest democratic countries in the world with a diversity of cultures. Multiculturalism and syncretism can be witnessed in every part of a country with such diversity. As a consequence, cultural assimilation and acculturation may occur at every level, be it religion, dress and ornaments, language, ritual practices, etc. Religion, being an important social institution, plays a vital role by bonding people together. It provides norms of life for its adherents to follow, thereby leading to a certain cohesion among the people. Religion is thus a cohesive force binding humans to have a harmonious life of mutual love, trust, and respect. Haviland, Prins, Walrath, and McBride (2008) define religion as “an organized system of ideas about spiritual reality, or the supernatural, along with associated beliefs and ceremonial practices” (p. 297). A similar definition was given by Wallace (1966) “a set of rituals, rationalized

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by myth, which mobilizes supernatural powers for the purpose of achieving or preventing transformations of state in man and nature” (p. 5).

Religion deals with ultimate concerns about human beings’ lives and their fate after death (Editors, 2021). According to some researchers, there are roughly 4,300 religions in the world (Juan, 2006). Christianity and Islam are the two religions most widely spread across the world with more than 2 billion and 1.8 billion adherents respectively (Vaughan, n.d.). According to the 2011 census of India, 966 million people of India practice Hinduism, 172 million adhere to Islam, 27 million follow Christianity, 20 million are Sikhs, 8 million follow Buddhism, 4 million practice Jainism, 7 million adhere to other religions, and more than 2 million belong to the “religion not specified” category (Census, 2011).

“Indigenous religions are the ancestral religions of peoples who are native to particular landscapes. Their religions help them achieve the goal of living successfully in those places. Thus, indigenous religions vary, just as the places their practitioners inhabit vary (Lokensgard & Gonzalez, 2014).

One of the areas anthropologists seek to understand is why religion is found in all societies and why it varies from society to society. Many western anthropologists have generated much research in this area (cf. Geertz, 1966; Pritchard, 1965; Tylor, 1871). Tylor who formulated the theory of ‘animism’ as the earliest stage of religion, is regarded as the founding father of the anthropology of religion. Tylor has defined religion as “a belief in spiritual being” (as cited in Abalogu et al., 2020). The uniqueness of Tylor’s theory was its hypothesis that the earliest form of religion was characterized by human ideas concerning a plurality of spirits and ghosts.

Rationale of the Study

With the advent of the modern era, traditional cultures and faiths have been on the verge of extinction as they lack written records and proper documentation. Older generation having the knowledge of their tradition and culture are dying out. Moreover, there are inevitable changes happening in the religious traditions of the indigenous cultures as well, due to various interactive factors. Hence, it is imperative to study and document the socio-religious aspects of indigenous cultures and religious practices, lest the future generations are in the dark about the rich heritage of these cultures.

Arunachal Pradesh, one of the northeastern states of India, has 25 major tribes and more than 100 subtribes. The *Tagin* tribe who traditionally practices *Donyi-Poloism* is one of the major tribes and is located mostly in the villages of Daporijo. This paper is the result of an investigation into the genesis, beliefs and practices of the indigenous religion of the *Tagins* as well as the various syncretic influences on their religion. There has been little research by anthropologists in this regard. Only a very few historical studies on the religion of the *Tagins* are currently available (Tripathy & Dutta, 2007; Rididi, 2009).

Methodology

The present study was descriptive in nature. The empirical data were collected through semi structured interviews, complemented by audio-visual aids. Audio visual aids were mostly used while recording the interviews by a recorder and cameras were used to click photos. Both primary data and secondary data were collected. Secondary data were collected by reviewing literature through published journal articles and books. Primary data were collected through interviews that lasted on an average 90 minutes. Around 10 key informants (male 7 and female 3) well-versed in the socio-cultural milieu of the people were selected. Both male and female members of the *Namlo* (prayer hall for the adherents of Donyi-Polo) were interviewed, including priests, literate and non-literate people, and youths were also interviewed. Total 35 people were interviewed of which 20 were males and 15, females. Both male and female priests of the *Namlo* were interviewed. Group discussion was also carried out among the youths of the *Namlo*. Interview included the informants from age group 20 to 45+ and most of them were literates and youths. The present study also followed up telephonic interviews.

Field Area

The study was conducted among the people of Daporijo, which comes under Upper Subansiri district in Arunachal Pradesh. The district is inhabited by the *Tagin*, *Galo*, and *Nyishi* tribes having more or less distinct cultures. Syncretic elements of tangible cultural markers such as food and drink, dress and ornament as well as non-tangible cultural markers such as faiths, beliefs, and practices can be seen amongst the people of Daporijo. The different ethnic groups follow Christianity, Hinduism and Donyi-Poloism. The area was chosen for the study, because of its syncretistic nature of three different faiths and the rapid increase in the population of Donyi-Poloists.

The researcher belonging to the same community where the field work was conducted had the advantage of rapport building and interacting with the informants.

Findings and Discussion

Origin and Ritual Practices of *Donyi-Polo* of *Daporijo*

Donyi-Polo, also known as Donyi-Poloism is the name given to the indigenous religion of the animistic and shamanic type of the *Tani* tribes (the major tribes of *Adi*, *Galo*, *Tagin*, *Nyishi*, and *Apatani*) and other Tibeto-Burman inhabitants of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam in the north-eastern India. *Donyi-Polo* literally means “Sun–Moon”. It must be noted that *Donyi* (Sun) and *Polo* (Moon) are considered female and male respectively in the *Tibeto–Burman* tradition wherein they address them as *Ane Donyi* meaning “Mother Sun”, and *Abo Polo* meaning “Father Moon” (Scheid, 2015). The Donyi-Polo movement, which was an attempt by the Adis to institutionalize their indigenous religion, started on 28 August 1968 with a meeting of Adi intellectuals at Along, West Siang District, to consider forming a larger entity by combining the Adi and the Galo tribes of Arunachal Pradesh (Dawar, 2004, p. 164; Chaudhuri, 2013, p. 263).

Donyi-Poloists of Daporijo believe that the concept of Donyi-Poloism was started by the Adi community of Pasighat, in the late 1960s. The founder of Donyi-Polo was Talom Rukbo whose 82nd birth anniversary was observed in 2020 at Pasighat. According to the informant L. Tamin, finance secretary of Tagin Indigenous Faith and Cultural Society (TIFCS, 2019), the followers of the revival designated Talom as *Golgi Bote Talom Rukbo*. *Golgi* is basically a name of a tree or plant which is considered immortal. It can survive in any condition and in any place, even on a rock or stone. *Bote* means a bigger person; it is a designation given to a person as a mark of respect and gratitude. *Golgi Bote* also refers to supreme power. Rukbo was the one who advocated the revival and he was the one who brought the concept to the people of Daporijo by bringing some books of prayers and hymns. He expressed the need for institutionalization of the traditional faith in these terms:

Tradition means the way of living of a society practicing its socio-religious culture, economic life, the way of preserving history, literature and all other norms of social life inherited from time immemorial which may be called social character and identity. (Chaudhuri, 2013, p. 264)

So with the aim of forming a literature on the tradition, Rukbo started the revival called Donyi-Polo and started institutionalizing it across the state, so that the indigenous culture and tradition remain alive among the people of Arunachal Pradesh and can be passed on to the next generation, both orally and in writing, especially among the *Tani* tribes viz, *Adi*, *Nyishi*, *Apatani*, *Galo*, and *Tagin*, who are believed to be the descendants of *Abo-Tani* who is considered the progenitor of the *Tani* tribes.

It is believed that the Donyi-Poloism had already been well established in Daporijo in the year 1996, but there is no written record of it. As reported by L. Tamin, it was registered officially only in the year 2012. The man who mobilized the revival at Daporijo is Puluk Lida, a *Tagin*. Even to the present day he has been actively contributing to the preservation and advocacy of the concept of Donyi-Polo and its tradition not only in Daporijo but across the state of Arunachal Pradesh as a whole.

According to the beliefs of the Donyi-Poloists of Daporijo, Sunday is the day chosen by Donyi-Polo itself, because its very name refers to ‘Sun-Day’ (*Donyi–Alu*). Some say that since Sunday is the rest day for everyone to leave behind the worldly works and gather at the altar to worship sun and moon: *Donyi* and *Polo*. They religiously gather in the prayer hall every Sunday morning in their own traditional attire irrespective of their age and gender.

Based on the interviews carried out at various Namlos of Daporijo, the flag is one of the important symbols for Donyi-Poloists, as they believe that flag reflects one’s identity of being a follower of Donyi-Polo. It also symbolizes unity among the followers. Flag-hoisting ceremony usually lasts from 1st of December till 31st of December, and is done by the *Nyibu* (priest) as well as by the heads of the families at each house. These flags are designed and distributed by the *Indigenous Faith and Cultural Society Arunachal Pradesh*, to the respective prayer halls in the district from where it is re-distributed to all the members of the Donyi-Polo. The flag is white in color with a symbol of the sun, red in color, at the center. They believe that in the day time, the light of *Donyi* (Sun) is so dominant that it covers the entire universe including all the *Takams* (stars) and *Polo* (moon) as well. Thus, they have chosen only the symbol of *Donyi* (sun) on the flag as it reflects both *Polo* (moon) and *Takam* (star). There are some followers who are still hoisting flag that reflects both *Donyi* (sun) and *Polo* (moon), as they believe the first flag was so designed but was later modified to reflect on the sun alone. People have also modified

the size of the flag, making it considerably bigger than the official flag, to cater to their own sense of identity and satisfaction. There are also some followers who hoist two flags in their houses, both the official flag reflecting only *Donyi* (sun) and the older version, reflecting both *Donyi* (sun) and *Polo* (moon). There are no restrictions in choosing and hoisting of the flag in their respective houses.

Indigenous faith day is being observed by the Donyi-Poloists on first of December, one of the most important days to be observed by the adherents, which also marks the birth anniversary of Talom Rukbo. Initially it had been observed on December 31. The *Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang* was also established on 31st December in the year 1986. *Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang* is the *Adi* governing body initially led by Kaling Borang. The body derives its full name from *Yelam*, an *Adi* word meaning “faith,” “old path,” or “kingdom”; and *kebang*, meaning “gathering” that refers also to the historical *Adi* local self-government (Scheid, 2015). Indigenous Faith Day or Donyi Polo Day was first observed to show solidarity among the people and to promote and preserve the indigenous culture and tradition. Organizations such as *Indigenous Faith and Cultural Society Arunachal Pradesh District Unit, Daporijo* (IFCS) and *Tagin Indigenous Faith and Cultural Society* (TIFCS) are functioning for smooth running of the places of worship and various related religious and cultural activities.

Some other rituals of the Donyi-Poloists of Daporijo are fellowship, house visits, and fasting. The adherents gather to pray for their own individual intentions, but especially for the members of the house where they are gathered. In performing such rituals, there are no restrictions or any codified rules and regulations. They may differ from person to person and family to family. The mode and frequency of fasting is also left to the individuals to decide. The Donyi-Poloists believe that fasting helps not only in strengthening their will power and spirit, but also brings prosperity in their life. The duration of the fast may vary according to the convenience of the individual.

Concept of *Nyedar Namlo* and *Youth Namlo*

On analyzing the interviews carried out in various *Namlos* of Daporijo area, it is found that the concept of *Nyedar Namlo* was introduced in the year 2012 in the district and the *Nyedar Namlo* (prayer hall) was named as *Central Namlo*. It is basically a prayer hall for the followers of Donyi-Polo, similar in

concept and function of a church or temple. *Nyedat-Namlo* is a *Nyishi* word which means ‘sacred place’. The current *Central Namlo* is basically for healing purposes and is built nearby the old building where it was initially housed. Here, most of the members are older people with few young people and children as well. Donyi-Poloists of Daporijo along with the organizations of the Donyi-Poloism came up with the idea of forming *Youth Namlo* in the year 2014. It was also a consequence of the construction of new building for *Central Namlo* and of the growing numbers of the youth in the *Namlo*. The *Youth Namlo* is housed in the same old building that used to be the *Central Namlo*.

Both the *Youth Namlo* and *Central Namlo* have ritualized forms of prayer and worship. The mode of gathering and lighting of the candles, *dijya* (a clay lamp with oil or ghee), and incense sticks, and offerings to the deities are quite similar in both the *Namlos*. The major difference is that in the *Youth Namlo*, there is no prosaic recitation of prayers; instead the *Nyibu* (priest) chants for the congregation using the following words, and the members also follow the *Nyibu* (priest) by repeating the same words:

*Boomyerang Donyi-Polo, Boomyerang Donyi-Polo, Boomyerang Donyi-Polo,
Teriya to Ane Donyi-No, Teriya to Ato Polo No, Chetam Bote Teriya to, Ane
Donyi Teriya to, Donyi-Polo Teriya to, Donyi-Polo Aya Jilaka, Boomyerang
Donyi-Polo, Boomyerang Donyi-Polo, Boomyerang Donyi-Polo.*

which means

Praised be sun and moon, praised be sun and moon, praised be sun and moon. Hear us mother sun, hear us father/grandfather moon, supreme power, hear us, mother sun, hear us, sun – moon, hear us, sun and moon, have mercy on us, praised be sun and moon, praised be sun and moon, praised be sun and moon.

In *Central Namlo*, both chanting and recitation of prayers are used. Here too, the priest leads the chanting; however, the members gathered pray aloud for various needs as well. Recitation of prayers starts with the salutation, “hai Donyi-Polo, hai Donyi-Polo, hai Donyi-Polo” and everyone together prays for the diseased persons and ends the prayer by saying “jai Donyi-polo, jai Donyi-polo, jai Donyi-polo” which basically means “praise to sun and moon”.

Influence of Other Religions on Donyi-Poloism

In the present context, there are many religions having different place of worshipping at Daporijo. There are *Jama-masjid*, *Guru duwara*, Christian church, Hindu temples and now Donyi Polo Namlo. The present study confirmed that the current rituals and practices of Donyi-Poloism have been significantly impacted by other religions, especially by Hinduism, Christianity, and Rangraism.

Influence of Hinduism

Hinduism is a collective term applied to the many philosophical and religious traditions native to India. Hinduism has neither a specific moment of origin nor a specific founder. Rather, the tradition understands itself to be timeless, having always existed (Srivastava & Barmola, 2013, p. 89). Hinduism came way before any other religion in Daporijo, and its influence on Donyi-Poloism, especially in some parts of the rituals inside and outside the *Namlo*, is evident. There are several tangible cultural elements that resemble those of the Hindus. For instance, lighting of *agarbati* or incense sticks, use of *diya*, use of copper plates for offering items and use of bowls are very much identical to those of the Hindu tradition. Sprinkling water on the faithful, drinking of that water by folding two hands seem to replicate Hindu ritual actions. Like Hindus, Donyi-Poloists also practice *bhoomi pooja* for the well-being of crops and prosperity of people, as they believe that mother earth supplies the necessary resources to human beings to sustain life. One of the most significant changes that can be seen in the *Namlo* is the introduction of *shivling* (a fertility idol referring to Lord Shiva) and people praying to that idol just like any Hindu devotee who prays to *Murti* (images) of the deities and treated with great reverence (Srivastava & Barmola, 2013). These facts confirm that the greater Indian tradition of Hinduism has significantly influenced the beliefs and practices of Donyi-Poloism.

Influence of Christianity

Christianity, major religion stemming from the life, teachings, and death of Jesus of Nazareth (the Christ, or the anointed One of God) in the 1st century CE. It has become the largest of the world's religions and, geographically, the most widely diffused of all faiths. It has a constituency of more than two billion believers (Stefon, 2020). Christianity came after Hinduism in Daporijo,

but it has influenced nearly half of the population of Daporijo, who accepted Christianity as their faith. Daporijo has many churches belonging to different Christian denominations such as the Revivals, the Catholics, the Baptists, and the Pentecostals. The Christian concepts of prayer crusades, healing, Sunday gathering, etc. are quite similar to those of Donyi-Poloism. The praising of Donyi-Polo three times at the beginning and at the end of a prayer is also one of the similarities between Donyi-Poloism and the Christian practices, especially of the Revival denomination. From taking offerings to conducting fellowship, flag-hoisting ceremonies (similar to hoisting Christmas star in Christianity), singing hymns, use of holy book, observing fasts for hours and days inside the *Namlo*, *gospelling* are some of the similar rituals of both the religions. Such resemblance in ritual practices is indicative of significant influences from Christianity.

Influence of Rangfraism

Rangfraism is the name chosen for a revivalist movement of *Tangsa* traditional spirituality. The intention was to give an alternative form of religious belief to those who were neither following the Christians beliefs nor the traditional ways. “*Rangfrab*” meaning “God of the skies” in *Longchang* dialect (one of the many *Tangsa* languages). The Rangfraa movement was started in the mid 1990s by a group of professionals, including doctors engineers and civil servants, led by the charismatic Latsam Khimhun, a senior civil engineer by profession (and government employee) (Ruscheweyh, 2015). The worshipping house of *Rangfrab* is called “*Rangshom Him*” where the Rangfrab idol is kept and where the followers gather and offer prayers. In setting up this new religion, the Rangfrab society leaders, led by Latsam Khimhun, have also borrowed from Buddhism and other religious revival and reform movements such as the Donyi-Polo and *Intyaism*, which were already existing in other parts of Arunachal Pradesh. (Ruscheweyh, 2015). The informants of the study reveal that Donyi-Poloists of Daporijo believe that both Donyi-Poloism and Rangfraism are identical and that it is only the name that is different due to the diversity in language and culture in both the tribes. For them (Donyi-Poloists of Daporijo) “*Rang*” means “*Donyi*” and “*Frab*” means “*Polo*”. The Rangfrab movement was led by Latsam Khimhun, and the movement is believed to have been suggested by Talom Rukbo to preserve and practice *Tangsa*’s traditional culture. According to the informant’s

narration, the term *Donyi-Polo* seemed quite contradictory and confusing to Latsam Khimhun to make the *Tangsa* people understand the movement, as their language was different. Therefore, they decided to go with the *Tangsa* word *Rangfrah*, to avoid the misrepresentation of the movement. Rangfraism was adopted in the year 1997 by the *Tangsa* people, and is still in vogue. Interviewing T. Ngute, Assistant General Secretary of the Central *Namlo* in Daporijo and other members of the *Namlo*, it is found that in the year 2018 the Donyi-Poloists of Daporijo began following Rangfraism along with Donyi-Poloism. They started using the holy book of Donyi-Polo as well as of Rangfrah to preach to the congregation. They have also adopted the idea of healing *Keychus* (pure ones) from Rangfraism. They believe that the healing *Keychus* are the people chosen by god Rangfrah to enable them to heal others. Such blessed people have many dos and don'ts in their daily life, be it in their behavior, conduct, selection of friends, or choice of food, in order to avoid toxicity; or else the gifts granted to them would be taken back and they no longer would be able to heal others. It is also said that certain amount of pain would be caused in their stomach if they are unable to follow the restrictions. Similar beliefs have been absorbed into Donyi-Poloism as well.

In this context, a case study undertaken with one of the members of *Central Namlo* is worth discussing.

Case Study

Mr. Tagi (pseudonym) is a 35-year old male from the Tagin tribe of Daporijo, who is a follower of Christ Jesus and believes in and follows Christ devotedly. He was baptized and served Christ for more than a year by teaching, preaching, and *gospelling* wherever he could. Once he got badly ill, doctors could not diagnose his problem. He sought every possible solution to his health problem, from consulting many doctors to following many traditional rituals, doing prayers in temples, fasting, etc. But he could not get healed by any of the above-mentioned rituals. Later on, he got to know about the healing tradition of Donyi-Poloism. He realized that his life was more important than any particular religion or its rituals, and hence, he decided to try out the rituals of Donyi-Poloism. Once he got into the Donyi-Polo movement, he came to know about Rangfraism. After attending many prayer sessions of both the Donyi-Poloism and Rangfraism, he realized that his

health began to improve and gradually he was healed. From that point of time, he adopted Donyi-Poloism and Rangfraism as his religions. While narrating the story, he also mentioned that during the period he was engaged in fasting at a Christian prayer center, he had this vivid and repeated dream wherein a little boy approached him asking to go along with him. When he narrated this dream to the prayer warriors at the fasting center, they interpreted that Christ Jesus was calling him to engage in full time ministry for him, asking him to give up everything and surrender himself to God and his ministry. However, he later interpreted to himself that it was Donyi-Polo who had been calling him through the figure of the child. Now that he is a Donyi-Polo follower serving in the ministry of *Central Namlo*, he has become a faithful follower and an influential member in the process of revival of traditional religions in different places of Arunachal Pradesh.

How a villager changes from one religion to another is influenced by many factors including one's perception and sometimes by individual dream and its interpretations. The study reveals that there is a constant interaction between the little indigenous traditions and wider global religious traditions that co-exist in a community. The little tradition consists of diverse local customs, rites, rituals, and dialect, whereas the greater traditions contain highly structured and developed forms of worship and practices. When little tradition and greater tradition interact with each other, two types of movements are observed – upward and downward movements. When the elements of little tradition move upward, it is known as “universalization” and when some elements of greater tradition move downward it is called as “parochialization”(Hasnain, 2016). These types of interactions are reflected in different areas such as village community, caste system, etc. Such interaction facilitates the emergence of a common cultural consciousness among the people. Though the little and greater traditions are different from one another and have different origins, they are still inter-related, inter-dependent, and interactive with one another. In the case of these two little indigenous traditions, i.e., Donyi-Poloism and Rangfraism are very much interactive, inter-related, and inter-dependent on each other. Similarly, it is also seen that there is a significant and constant interaction between the greater tradition i.e. Hinduism and Christianity and the little indigenous tradition i.e. Donyi-Poloism and Rangfraism.

Conclusion

Society, culture, tradition, and institutions are not static. They are dynamic and constantly evolving with respect to time and environment as well as with the rapid growth in technology and communication. Modernization, westernization, industrialization, and urbanization are a few key factors responsible for the complex cultural evolution and within group variation. In the past decade, it can be said that the tribal population of Daporijo has witnessed rapid changes, culturally as well as religiously, especially with the advent of other religions, especially Christianity. It has also triggered a conscious desire to preserve, revive, and relive their own traditional cultural and religious practices. The locals began searching for their cultural roots, origins, indigenous faith and practices. This urge led to the institutionalization of the revival movement called Donyi-Poloism. Their main intention is to preserve and promote their cultural and traditional belief system, consolidated in form so as to pass it on to the future generations. In this process, they have also drawn from the new religions that have been introduced into their region, resulting in acculturation and cultural assimilation. It also led to the modernization of their indigenous belief system, making it relevant to the contemporary times. One may conclude that Donyi-Poloism, as it exists in Daporijo, is an indigenous religion that has syncretically drawn from Christianity and Hinduism, in order to modernize and make relevant the traditional values and rituals. In the process, it has also facilitated the birth of newer forms of religious persuasions such as Rangfraism.

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