



The Institutionalization of Tribal Religion

Recasting the Donyi-Polo Movement in Arunachal Pradesh

Arunachal Pradesh, the erstwhile North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), is the homeland of a large number of tribes with distinctive identities spread over sixteen districts. This state shares boundaries with Tibet, China, and Myanmar and is known for its cultural diversity. This is reflected in the different tribes living there, although some commonalities can also be seen and have been used as a basis to make some broader classifications and connections between the tribes. The majority of the tribes can be classified as “animists,” but tremendous heterogeneity is evident in the nature of deities, spirits, religious specialists, festivities, and oral traditions. With the emergence of new faiths and practices, new reformist movements are gradually gaining ground among the tribes in order to protect and preserve their indigenous religious beliefs and practices. This article deals with the major reformist movement known as Donyi-Poloism. This movement was initiated by the Tani group of tribes to understand the contested domains of religious transformation; this, in turn, may shed some light on the emerging realities of the frontier state.

KEYWORDS: Donyi-Poloism—*Gangging*—religion—ritual—image—Christianity—reformist movement

ARUNACHAL PRADESH, formerly the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), is located in Northeast India, bordering Tibet, China, and Myanmar. Known for its cultural diversity, its sixteen districts are home to a large number of distinctive tribes.¹ Despite this diversity, some commonalities can also be seen, which some scholars have used as a basis to make general classifications and connections between the tribes. For instance, one can classify the tribes as Buddhist and non-Buddhist on the basis of religious beliefs and practices, but this is too simplistic an explanation to grasp the entire spectrum of intricate traditional religious faiths and practices. Although the majority of the tribes can be classified as animist, tremendous heterogeneity separates the deities, spirits, religious specialists, festivities, and oral traditions of each tribe. However, like many other tribes of the region, the tribes of Arunachal are passing through a phase of transition, and Christianity is undoubtedly becoming one of the dominant forms of faith practiced by many tribes of this state, such as the Adi, Nyishi, Apatani, Galo, Tagin, Wancho, Nokte, Tangsa, and the Sulung, among others.

Christianity has a long history in the context of Arunachal, though its impact and acceptability have had tribe-specific connotations. For example, Riddi states,

The missionaries tried to spread their activities in the Tagin area only after 1950. During the early years of independence, the administration attempted to promote indigenous religions by not allowing the missionaries to come in and proselytize the tribes. They tried to create a climate in which the old religions could grow and reform themselves “from within” so that ultimately they would have a wider and purer conception of God and man. (RIDDI 2009, 232–33)

It should be added that the NEFA administration imposed restrictions on missionaries building churches and carrying out proselytizing activities beyond the “inner line.” It also insisted that songs and hymns sung in schools should be secular in character. Despite these various protective measures, within the last few decades Christianity has become one of the major dominant forces, and this has led to massive conversion among most of the major tribes of this frontier state.

With the emergence of these new faiths and practices, reformist movements have been gradually gaining ground among the tribes in order to protect and preserve their indigenous religious beliefs and practices. Such reformist movements

have generated new taxonomies, such as “Donyi-Poloism,” “Intyaism,” “Rangfraism,” and so on. These movements have tried to institutionalize tribal religion by inventing images of gods and goddesses, constructing temples, and textualizing religious chants or oral traditions in a manner very similar to that of Hinduism. In order to understand the contested domains of religious transformation historically, this article deals with these different reformist practices by taking examples from various Tani tribes, with special reference to the Adi tribe. This ultimately may shed some light on the emerging realities of the frontier state.

THE CHRISTIAN BACKDROP

The Adi were the first community in the state to institutionalize their indigenous religion and start a new reformist movement called Donyi-Poloism. In the early post-independent period (1950s) Donyi-Poloism did not operate as a religious institution. In fact, it emerged in response to the policy of the Indian state and the interventions of Christian missionaries in the Adi-inhabited areas that created an identity crisis in relation to the traditional cultural mosaic.² DAWAR (2004, 160) writes,

During the 1950s the policymakers of the Indian state had to grapple with the question of “integration” of Arunachal Pradesh (formerly known as NEFA) to the Indian “mainstream.” The most important exponents of the formulation of this policy towards NEFA were: Sir Akbar Hydari and Jairamdas Daulatram (both of whom were governors of Assam), Jawaharlal Nehru (the then Prime-Minister of India), and Verrier Elwin, the Adviser, Tribal Affairs, to the Governor of Assam. However, Elwin played the key role in 1953 and largely moulded the government policy towards NEFA. The policy pursued during this period is generally known as the Nehru-Elwin policy.

DAWAR further reflects (2004, 160–61) on this policy placed on the NEFA by examining various documents, archival or otherwise, where an attempt was made to fill the gap between “us” and “them” and cultural hegemony was exercised in the process of integration by appropriating the tribal way of life. Moreover, in this process, the state provided official patronage to tribal religions with the aim of keeping the population away from Christian missionary activities, which were antithetical to tribal faith and tradition. ELWIN clearly mentioned his stand regarding the policy toward the tribal people of NEFA in his seminal book (1957), which includes a chapter entitled “The religious aim of NEFA.” He was a great critic of both the “isolation” and “assimilation” approaches. For Elwin, assimilation is equivalent to “detribalization,” and such a policy would suggest that “animism” should be replaced by the purer ideas of Christianity and Hinduism. ELWIN (1957, 20–21) was skeptical about the religious aims of NEFA as he wrote,

I doubt if the NEFA people will accept Hinduism in any organized manner. Between them and that great religion stands the gentle figure of the cow. Yet there are many things which should attract them in popular Hinduism: the same

belief in a supreme deity ruling over a host of lesser spirits; the same sacrifices; the same colorful festivals, myths, and legends of a rather similar pattern.

Regarding Christianity, Elwin continued:

Christianity has made an appeal to the hill people of Assam (though, curiously enough, it has had very little success in Middle India and Orissa) because it has been associated in their minds with the idea of progress. Its flexibility with regard to food rules has more than compensated for its rigidity about such matters as rice beer and polygamy.

ELWIN (1957, 20–21)

However, he also mentioned that there were strong grounds in favor of spreading Christianity among the NEFA people because it could enhance regional solidarity rather than cause ethnic cleavage. He states,

A number of people, themselves Christian by faith, believe that the best solution of the religious question in NEFA is to admit Indian missionaries and to encourage a general Christianization of the tribes. If the form of Christianity introduced was of a liberal kind and truly national in spirit, this would, they argue, bring many spiritual benefits to the people, and would save the educated from an irreligious and materialistic outlook. Since many of the hill people in the autonomous district of Assam State are already Christian, the tribesmen of NEFA could then be united with them in one Frontier State, in which there would be a natural religious unity and no place for communal dissension. In any case, the educated will not retain their old religion.

(ELWIN 1957, 210)

Though Elwin did not believe in such ideas, he also did not pronounce any crusade against any forms of organized religions. Rather, he opined that Christian communalism can be as dangerous as Hindu or Muslim communalism. He argued,

But three things do seem to me to be wrong: that the obsolete theological divisions and controversies of the western world should be introduced into the tribal areas as a result of multiplying different missions and churches; that young children, before they have reached an age when they can think things out of themselves, should be proselytized; and that officials, servants of a secular State, should use their position to promote their own religion, whatever they may be.

(ELWIN 1957, 221–22)

However, the history of Christianity in the Adi-inhabited areas can be traced back to 1907. Christian advances into the area briefly came to a halt in 1911 with the murder of British Officer Noel Williamson at the hands of some Adis in Kom-sing village, though the missionaries were able to penetrate into the region again in 1913 to eradicate an epidemic. In 1914 a school was opened in one of the plains villages to educate the Adis from nearby hill areas. The Adi villages of nearby plains areas also accommodated the missionary Mrs L. W. B. Jackman and family, who lived with them for a considerably long period. Two Garo evangelists were sent for several months. They worked among the Adi, learning the language and engaging in educational and medical work (SANGMA 1987, 263–72).

Koyu writes, “Ever since Christianity came to the region, there has been a series of interactions and collations between Christianity and tribal culture, leading to the destruction of tribal cultural elements and even physical pulling down of churches and other places of worship” (KOYU 2011, 55–56). According to Tomo RIBA (2003), Christianity has brought far-reaching change to every aspect of Adi society and culture. This can be perceived in both positive and negative ways. Among the positive changes are the encouragement of unity among the Christian fraternity, the creation of a common fund that can be used for common causes, including the discarding of socially evil practices, the inheritance of moral values of life, and the providing of free education and financial aid to the needy converts. On the other hand, the social distancing of traditional socio-religious ceremonies and the creation of misconceptions about non-converts are among the negative changes caused by Christianity. Koyu further added,

The youth find pleasure in the lifestyle of a Christian whom they consider modern and westernized. The spread of Christianity adversely affected the traditional dance, music and festivals. The converts not only decline to participate in dance and music but also have abandoned most of the festivals like *Solung*, *Etor*, *Aran*, etc. They consider these festivals as unsacred because they are against the preaching’s of the Bible, as they include drinking of wine, eating sacrificial meat, etc. Further they openly denounce the long cherished faiths and belief of the Adi in particular and of the tribal people in general. Many of the converts call the indigenous spirits and deities Satan (demon). (KOYU 2011, 58)

Between 1970 and 2010, twelve churches were established in Adi-inhabited areas of East Siang districts, out of which ten belong to the Baptist denomination. Similarly, KOYU adds, from 1952 to 2008, ten temples, such as Balaji Mandir, Shiv Mandir, Radha Krishna Mandir, and others, were established in Adi-inhabited areas to worship various Hindu gods and goddesses (2011, 53).

THE EMERGENCE OF DONYI-POLOISM

Donyi and *polo* literally mean “sun” and “moon,” which the Tani group of tribes in Arunachal Pradesh, such as the Adi, Nyishi, Apatani, Tagin, and the Galo, worship for prosperity, fertility, and protection from calamities. 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, 164). The late Talom Rukbo, the founding member of the Donyi-Polo movement, said that sometimes the concept of Donyi-Poloism is confusing as it has multiple connotations. For example, it represents Almighty God, symbolizes the sun and the moon, and also manifests itself in the traditional belief systems of the Tani tribes. According to him, the ritual and spiritual aspects of the culture of the people of Arunachal Pradesh are eroding gradually due to a lack of written form and proper practice like those of

other ethnic groups. So, with the aim of restoring the decaying rituals, prayers, and hymns, the people of the Abotani group, mainly the Adi, the Nyishi, and the Apatani have organized cultural societies in the name of the Tani Jagriti Foundation, the Donyi-Polo Youth Federation, and the Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang at Pasighat (RUKBO 1998, 57–75; 2004, 92–100).

Rukbo strongly expressed his views regarding the need for the institutionalization of religious faith of the Adis: “Tradition means the way of living of a society practicing its socio-religious culture, economic life, the way of preserving history, literatures and all others norms of social life inherited from time immemorial which may be called social character and identity” (RUKBO 2005, 33). He felt that many such tribal traditions are fading out, and institutionalization is the only way to preserve these traditions. He was instrumental in the institutionalization of the Adi religion and evolved the concept of “Donyi-Poloism.” RUKBO³ (n.d.) stated that faith in the supreme power that is represented by *donyi* and *polo* and the practice of worshiping this absolute power is called Donyi-Poloism. He added that Donyi-Poloism has two separate aspects—material Donyi-Polo and spiritual Donyi-Polo. The former means the material planets—the sun and moon in separate form—but the latter aspect means the synthetic form of the sun and the moon that is the absolute power that governs the universe in a scientific and eternal manner. Related to this, Donyi-Polo also means purity, beauty, simplicity, love, and frankness, which are great virtues, and virtue and morality are further understood as being the manifestation of a Supreme Being. Regarding the origin of this Supreme Being, RUKBO (n.d., 2–3) wrote that the origin of God (Donyi-Polo) is beyond the reach of human knowledge. The existence of the powers of Donyi-Polo is revealed by God himself from time to time. Scientifically it has been proven that without light, heat, air, and water, living beings cannot survive. There has always been scientific proof to validate this point, Rukbo argued, and he tried to justify this view by narrating a myth found among the Adi tribe.

According to the myth, there were once two suns that gave the living beings no time to sleep or rest. To obtain rest and peace of mind one of the two suns was killed. In protest, the other sun did not rise. The whole universe was totally covered in darkness, which created more unhappiness, and it became hard for living beings to survive. With promises and offerings of lives that the living sun wanted from the living beings as punishment for their cruelty, the living sun and the injured sun rose alternately, giving light and dark, which allowed them to live in peace. The injured sun hence became the moon. According to RUKBO, this symbolizes the scientific proof of supreme power: that without light and dark it is impossible to live on this earth (n.d., 2–3). Rukbo had a huge impact among the Adi intellectuals who strongly felt the necessity of preserving traditional Adi faith and practices in the face of the growing penetration of Christianity, which was changing the cultural landscape of the Adi-inhabited areas as well as that of other districts largely inhabited by the Tani group of tribes. Naturally, many Adi intellectuals echoed Talom Rukbo’s ideas regarding new forms of Donyi-Poloism, and these gradually spread across the tribes and even beyond the Tani groups.

According to ERING (2004), as a religious concept Donyi-Polo is essentially a channel of human aspirations as traditionally understood by the people. Donyi-Polo is associated with superstitions, myths, and legends, and has some deeper philosophy. Some tribes of Arunachal Pradesh claim themselves to be the direct descendants of the great legendary human father called Abotani who has the distinction of being the first human being on the planet. Under the supremacy of Donyi-Polo, the Adis classified various gods and goddesses, deities, and spirits whom they worship for different purposes. They believe that all such gods, goddesses, and so on, are sent by Sedi, the great creator, to look after all the human beings of the earth. He adds,

Since there are no written documents and systematic oral literature to substantiate the philosophic conception of Donyi-Polo, we may communicate things by analyzing traditional belief, faith and practices.... Depending upon circumstances and situations, by this term, they mean truth, purity, enlightenment, wisdom, justices, righteousness, peace and nonviolence. (ERING 2004, 36-37)

THE CONCEPT OF GANGGING

Gangging is an Adi word which literally means a place of worship, traditional faith, and Adi beliefs.⁴ It may also be conceived of as a place where struggles took place to denounce evil spirits. According to Kaling Borang, *gangging* is a location from which wisdom and enlightenment emanate and from which they can repel outside influences. This concept emerged along with the Donyi-Poloism reform movement, popularized by the Donyi-Polo Yelam Kebang (DYK) under the leadership of Talom Rukbo. This voluntary organization was established on 31 December 1986, which is also called Donyi-Polo Day. Other founder members included Kaling Borang, Late Dibui Moyong, Late Talut Tamuk, Oshong Ering, and Tapon Jomang. This organization came into existence in order to give a structured form to Donyi-Poloism. According to Rukbo, the word *gangging* originally derived from Gangging Siring, an imaginary land or spiritual tree that exists somewhere in between the spiritual and natural world and from which every living and non-living object came into existence. Among the Adis, *gangging* is a sacred place to keep the idols of gods and goddesses for worship. According to Tayeng,

The practical ideas of systematic revival were brought by some members of the Donyi-Polo Mission who attended a meeting in the World Religious Conference and who sowed the seeds of religious practice at Pasighat in December 1996. From then onward they gathered every Saturday regularly. Orientation courses to train youth were also conducted to spread the message of Donyi-Polo.

(TAYENG 2008, 22-24)

Earlier male dormitories (*mosup*) served some of the functional aspects of *gangging*, but they had some problems accommodating all practitioners because of certain taboos. For instance, women were not allowed on certain occasions, people who had been bitten by snakes or attacked by wild animals were not allowed in



FIGURE 1. *Gangging* in an Adi village, Oyan, East Siang District. Photographs by Kaling Pao.



FIGURE 2. Internal structure of a *gangging* in an Adi village, East Siang District.

until certain rituals were performed, and parents of newborn babies were also not allowed in.

Gangging members have to follow certain rules. Male members must sit on the left in rows, and female members on the right, cross-legged. Within the *gangging* there should not be any noise during prayer except the harmonious sound of the hymns. Prayers are organized in the *ganggings* on Sundays, and all of the *gangging* branches established in each of the villages under the Siang district are centrally regulated by the DYK. In fact, the initiation of *gangging* to spread Donyi-Poloism is intricately linked with the formation of the DYK. In his narration of the activities of DYK, RUKBO (2005, 35–36) wrote,

First the religious literature of old practice was collected and compiled and books were published. Second, prayer songs were composed and books were published. Third, for gathering people, a Donyi-Polo temple was constructed at Pasighat. Fourth, images of Donyi-Polo and other gods and goddesses were prepared and others were placed on the altar of the temple. Fifth, valuable ornaments were collected and then other healing materials were collected and kept in the temple for use.

Rukbo described in the same text the details of the institutional ritual practices of Donyi-Poloism, such as holding public gatherings for prayers on Saturdays and requiring compulsory donations from believers. Candles and scented perfume are used as ritual articles for burning on the altar in front of the images. After this the priest sprinkles sanctified water on the heads of the devotees. Then an experienced person will read or narrate the philosophy of Donyi-Polo. Either before or after prayer, the healing rope (*ridin*) is tied onto the wrist of the devotees by the priest, symbolizing the blessing of Donyi-Polo. It ends with the closing prayer.

There are some sacred material elements found inside the *gangging* that are used in different contexts while chanting rituals, including *Emul*, *Ridin*, and *Asi*. TAYENG (2008, 33–37) narrated some chants relating to these sacred objects that help to understand the nature and content of such ritual chants.

Emul: This represents a metal ornament used for performing certain rites to call back a lost soul. The following are the chants relating to *Emul*:

Niinur tuuyinge lamping no
Looming atange meerang no
Donyi yaloe pokna takamem
Doonang jimange jiona takamem
Yalo solongem sobi kune
Silo, milo siramnem,
Nyamne giiramnem
Ayid kukuem kubi langkukae
Yalo solongem sobi langkuka
Mibo nudenge teena takaemem
Uyu nekoe poona takame
Lamping gooronge goobom dakla

Mibo kiilingem dobit langka
Uyu angkadem duat langka

In brief, the meaning of this chant is: “You are made by the great smith Niinur Lomang as a weapon to regain the lost soul of an ill man. Perform the healing of this ill man and your dreadful sound will drive out all evil spirits.”

Ridin: A sacred thread that signifies a lifesaving string:

Sedi liane tandan kone
Melo omie beri kone
Doorne ruange koodang telo
Neyi kope belunge garbuk kunem
Pedong rindo kope amin biidungem
Puulen toku
Neyi akbe obang kone
Dooying yiirine rindo kope emto
Kiine diange yiirangpe maabongnem
Siking kiirin rindo kope emto
Dooying taabe takam bulu
Taabe dudunge tuutek gename
Milo siiramnem, nyamme giiram nem
Rindo lejinem jinlik langka
Rinya lakjinem jinlik langka emla
Taabe ormanem paabi namko
Rindo lejinem jinlik bidak
Rindo lakjinem jinlik bidak
Kinam rmnam takame ailangkuka.

Briefly, the above chant means, “You (*egin*) are derived from the vital vein and limbs of *Sedi* and sanctified as life savior by all the priests in yonder days as medicine and as a strong weapon against all evil spirits. So you are tied in the wrist and neck to cure ailment and to give protection from evil eyes” (TAYENG 2008, 33–37).

After hearing the message of this institutionalized and rationalized method of Donyi-Polo prayer, people thronged to the DYK. Representatives from interior areas expressed a deep enthusiasm to learn and practice this newly-devised form of the Adi religion. To meet growing demand, DYK started orientation courses twice a year and trained groups of youths, who were sent back with books and photographs of Donyi-Polo gods and goddesses to their respective villages (RUKBO 2005, 36). They started preaching this institutional form of the Donyi-Polo faith and encouraged people to construct *gangging* within the villages, taking responsibility to conduct prayers every Sunday. From the main center of DYK located at Pasighat, trained youths were instructed to go around other villages to spread the message of the Donyi-Polo movement, leading to a revival of the Donyi-Polo faith.

After covering the East Siang district, the message reached the Upper Siang and West Siang districts, then gradually penetrated into the Lohit district. Two new centers at the capital complex, Naharlagun and Itanagar, spread the movement

to Papumpare and the Lower and Upper Subansiri districts. The DYK decided to declare that Donyi-Polo Day was to be solemnized by all as Solidarity Day for the Donyi-Polo believers. Within these last two decades, this spiritual mission has gained wide momentum by influencing various tribes of Arunachal Pradesh to revive their indigenous religion by bringing about reform in an institutionalized way. However, the movement is suffering from challenges on various fronts that Rukbo expressed, such as the struggle to obtain funds, land, dedicated regular workers for DYK activities, and people who can textualize oral narratives. Also, there is resistance from some people; challenges posed by the incursion of alien cultures; language problems; and the attitude of Anglicized groups (RUKBO 2005, 37–38). Regarding the problem of the Anglicized groups, RUKBO (2005, 39) said that they are exclusively highly qualified people with high ranking jobs, and are the leading public figures in whom the common people have faith to both lead their society to greater heights and to preserve their traditional faith and culture. But in actual practice they remain aloof from society in general, which is a great setback for the Adis. However, judging by the endeavor and the endurance of the people, it can be said that the perpetuation of the Donyi-Polo faith is by and large ensured and that the people have gained the self-confidence and moral strength to preserve and practice their spiritual path. The rejuvenated faith has roused curiosity and inquisitiveness, and the response toward the DYK has been tremendous.

INVENTING IMAGES

Rukbo, the prime mover in the Donyi-Polo movement, explained the reasons for inventing man-made images of Kine Nane (the goddess of food grains and prosperity), Dadi Bote (the god of domestic animals), and others, which are placed inside the prayer hall:

There is a great sublime purpose behind it; though various images are insentient it is the conscious and sentient gods or goddess that are brought to the minds of people by the images as we remember the living and conscious person when we see his/her photograph. We find that all religions have images of their gods/goddesses and prophets. Leaving aside the question of the Hindus and the Buddhists, the Christian worship the crucifix, the Muslim adore the *Kaaba* stone, the patriots worship the national flag. (RUKBO n.d., 12–13)

In their religious practice the Adis have traditionally erected an altar that resembles a skeleton out of branches of trees and bamboo from imagination, and they also worship this image on other occasions. But in festivals besides Mopin, the Adis generally do not use images. Offerings are only made at the consecrated place in their homes and in the fields during the Solung festival. This does not leave an impression of the deities in their hearts or minds and so causes the followers to doubt their existence.

RUKBO (n.d.) believes that such doubts divert the faith of the people. Therefore they brought out the images of sentient gods and goddesses, amalgamating tribal

(Adis) imaginary visions so that the shadows of the images are imprinted in the minds of the people who can recognize and identify their own gods and goddesses and remember them at all times. According to Rukbo, the multiple images that are found along with Donyi-Polo are not separated from the Supreme One; rather, these are the manifestation of multiple identities of Donyi-Polo, each with specific functional roles that the forefathers of the Adis recognized and passed on to new generations with different names, such as Kine Nane, Dadi Bote, Guumin Soyin, and so on.

In fact, for RUKBO (n.d., 16–17) this Donyi-Polo movement was part of a wider movement to rebuild Adi society based on eternal and encompassing values to lead a good life. To achieve this, leaders of all clans, cults, and sub-tribes have an obligation to fulfill by following certain simple social disciplinary rules common to all Adis, by which all Adis will feel they belong to a great brotherhood of the Donyi-Polo faith.

IMPACT AMONG THE GALO TRIBE

As with the Adis, this Donyi-Polo movement has spread among the Galos who come under the Tani constellation of tribes. In Galo-inhabited areas, Donyi-Polo temples have come up under the patronage of the Donyi-Polo Welfare Association (DPWA). In the context of Likabali, a Galo-inhabited area, Mibi Riba reported that on 18 June 2000, Tamar Karlo organized a meeting, and invited representatives from the different villages of West Siang district and the main leaders of the Donyi-Polo movement, such as Talom Rukbo and Nabam Atum (RIBA 2005). She added that they discussed the necessity of constructing a temple as well as a community hall (*dere*) by raising donations, and this meeting led to the formation of the DPWA. Accordingly, construction of the Donyi-Polo temple and community hall were completed on 6 May 2001 with the formation of a nine-member executive committee under the chairmanship of Tamar Karlo.

The activities inside the temples are similar to those inside the *ganggings* in Adi areas. Followers gather on Sundays, and a priest (*nyibu*) may attend. They use prayer books printed in the Galo language, and the opening prayer book is called *Angun-Bedang*, which was prepared by the central DYK under the supervision of Talom Rukbo. Generally, the priest arrives early, and the followers reach the prayer hall or temple around 9 a.m., after which prayers and other ceremonial activities actually start. After the prayer song, another prayer (*Murnam*) is offered to protect people from misfortunes or illness. It is chanted by the priest or by a person who conducts the whole affair in case the priest is absent. Another person narrates tales or legends related to Donyi-Polo. This is followed by a ritual performed either by the priest or the assistant priest. The priest stands at the doorstep holding water in a container and sprinkles it with the help of a small ritual stick called a *tajir*. This is an act of purification that—according to the Galo belief system—even cures sickness. Next, all the devotees or followers stand and sing the closing

song from the book prepared by Talom Rukbo, after which food is distributed in their community hall built adjacent to the temple or prayer hall.

Foundation day is celebrated every 6 May by sacrificing animals, and people enjoy the day by singing and dancing inside the community hall. Similarly, 31 December is celebrated in a grand way throughout the inhabited areas of the Adi and Galos as Donyi-Polo day. On this occasion, the followers of Donyi-Poloism bring food and local drinks from their respective homes and keep them near the images or inside the prayer hall; the priest then invokes blessings upon those things. After the prayer and other performances are over, all the food and drinks are pooled together and are shared by the people present on that particular occasion inside the community hall.

Diverse opinions on the essence of this movement are found among the Galos. Some believe that it has brought some order or systematization within their traditional religion by inventing forms and symbols, which were necessary to protect their indigenous religion. However, in the Likabali area, a majority of the Galos have accepted Christianity (RUKBO n.d., 16–17).

THE DANYI-PIILO MOVEMENT AMONG THE APATANIS

Among the Apatanis, a similar religious reform movement is popularly known as the Danyi-Piilo movement. In response to that movement, the Apatanis constructed temple-like structures, which are called *Meder Nello*, and printed a prayer book with various songs and hymns called *Lyambope*. This was initiated by the organizer of *Meder Nello* of Hari village, one of the biggest villages of the Apatanis located in the Ziro valley. YAMPI (2009, 351) reported that in 1998, the first such gathering of the Apatanis took place in the house of Rubu Tamin in Tajang village. In fact, it was there that they made the decision to have a permanent temple-like construction. This was built first in Hari village and was inaugurated by Kaling Tayeng, an IAS (Indian Administrative Service) officer on 28 March 2004. The word *Meder* means “purify” and *Nello* means “household site,” and *Meder Nello* was coined by Kago Siga of Hija village. Now every *Meder Nello* within the Ziro valley has a committee to look after its functional and organizational aspects. Yampi also added,

Every Sunday the followers of Danyi-Piilo religion gather at *Meder Nello* for the offering of regular prayers where they start praying for themselves as well people who are sick or unwell. At the end of the prayer if any one wishes, they can perform a ritual act that is offering rice powder before the images of Danyi and Piilo. The responsibility of preparing rice powder or rice beer is distributed among the followers or members whose turns are decided clan wise. Just like the *Raksha Dhaga* [*Raksha* means protection and *Dhaga* means thread] of the Hindus, followers of Danyi-Piilo tie a black thread [*Tiipyra*] on their wrists for protection from evil forces. In order to run this regular worship the members have to pay fifty rupees annually as donation. (YAMPI 2009, 351)

Apatanis are divided on the issues related to this movement. Many feel that the way Piiloism is being practiced in order to promote indigenous religion as well as culture is highly questionable. Furthermore, many believe that the movement is diluting the very essence of that indigenous identity by resembling the Hindu mode of worship by using incense sticks, candles, ringing bells, and the like, which are promoted by Arunachal Vikash Parisad (a branch of the Akhil Bharatiya Vanavashi Ashram [ABVKA] functioning among the Apatanis since 1990). This organization runs Balbadi or Vikash Schools (meaning schools for the children) in the Apatani valley, and it also tries to persuade people to promote indigenous religious faiths and practices. YAMPI (2009, 354) has referred to the comments of Kago Zerang, president of the Apatani Youth Association, who stated that it would have been good if the Apatanis revived their religion without copying the religion of others, and that the ongoing practice of Danyi-Piiloism seems to be a combination of both Christianity and Hinduism. BATH (2004), among others, has opined that it is diluting the very core of their traditional religious faith, and that the *nyibus* (priests) have hardly any place in the new movement. There were also incidents that created some tensions in the valley between the followers of Christianity and Danyi-Piiloism, disrupting the much-desired social cohesion.

THE NYADER-NAMLO MOVEMENT OF THE NYISHI

According to the Nyishi language, *nyedar* means “prayer” and *namlo* means “hall.” Just like the *gangging* of the Adis, the Donyi-Polo movement culminated in the construction of prayer halls in Nyishi-inhabited areas with the similar aim of preserving and protecting traditional belief systems in the context of the rapid spread of Christianity. SHOWREN (2003, 50–53) mentioned that “The Nyishi Art and Cultural Society which was formed in 1984 was renamed Nyishi Indigenous Faiths and Cultural Society (NIFCS)” in 1998 with certain fundamental aims and objectives.” The word *nyedar* means “pure” or “clean” whereas *namlo* means “place” or “sacred home” which contextually means “followers of *Aabh Tan* ‘Father Tani,’ the first ancestor of Nyishi and worshipper of *Aan Donyi* ‘Mother Sun’” (SHOWREN 2003). Showren also writes,

Thus, the term Nyedar Namlo has come to acquire a special connotation in relation to the evolution of Nyishi indigenous religion and culture. The Nyedar Namlo was formally inaugurated on 22 April 2001 at the ancient village, Jeragabh (now called Doimukh,) by Sri T. C. Teli, the Honorable Minister of Revenue, Excise and Urban Development. With the establishment of this Namlo a new dimension has been added to the indigenous faith and beliefs of Nyishi in particular and the people of Arunachal Pradesh in general.

SHOWREN (2003, 50–53)

According to Tam Takia, while discussing the emergence of new movements in 2003, one Nyishi supporter of the movement said,

Due to rapid changes and influence of foreign culture and foreign religion, such a movement was inevitable. Our Nyishi people need a certain place to get together and pray. So some of the Nyishi intellectuals or knowledgeable persons, like Sri Nabam Tata, Nabum Atum, and Techhi Tadik, previous president of the Nyishi Indigenous Faith and Culture Society, initiated such efforts in 2001 in the house of Tana Tachu Tara at Doimukh, to test how one can perform it and whether it can be sustained or not. Nowadays, Nyedar Namlo is being conducted every Sunday. But that time it was done on Saturdays only. Later the day was changed to Sunday so that more people, especially government officials, could join in the movement, and it received good response from the nook and corner of the Nyishi inhabited areas. It is conducted by especially trained people.

(SHOWREN 2003, 50–53)

In fact, to conduct the Nyedar Namlo, training was given to youths who expressed interest. So far they have conducted three to four rounds of training even in remote areas like Koloriang Nyapin, Sangram, Palin, Baliyan, Seppa, and so on. Moreover, just like other tribes, the institution of priesthood, which played a very significant role among the Nyishis in multiple ways, is fading from the socio-religious base. Through this new movement, Nyishis are trying to retain their ritual chanting, spiritual healing, and large treasure of oral traditions by following the same method through which the Adis are trying to nurture theirs—by institutionalizing their religious faith and practices.

CONCLUSIONS

This discussion brings into focus how the tribal people of Arunachal Pradesh are trying to cope with the heterogeneous forces that are responsible for bringing changes in the spheres of religious faith and practices. It is true that Hinduism or Hindu missionaries gained political patronage from the state since the achievement of statehood. Hinduized cults, temples, gods, and goddesses also penetrated into the frontier state, arriving with a massive military base, established after the 1962 Chinese intrusion, and also with developmental initiatives, particularly the creation of roads in difficult terrains by the BRO (Border Roads Organization). This can be easily seen in the visibility of temples in army cantonment areas and the large numbers of smaller shrines or small temple-like structures established by the BRO's mobile laborers on the roadsides nearer to their labor camps. Again, people who came from different parts of India as government employees, school teachers, businessmen, and so on, also celebrate major Hindu festivals, such as Durga puja, Saraswati puja, Kali puja, Viskarma puja, and even Holi, and some of the local tribal people also participate in them. These Hinduized celebrations or sacred domains have successfully created some space in the psyche of the local tribes, specifically those who are living in urban or semi-urban areas or even on the fringes of urban villages. The various Hinduized organizations, such as Ramakrishna Mission, Vivekananda Mission, Sharada Mission, and perhaps the most influential, Vivekananda Kendra Vidyalaya, are another prime force that render

tremendous services in the sectors of both education and health. Many eminent public leaders, intellectuals, social workers, and administrators across the tribes of contemporary Arunachal are the products of such Hindu missions.

Within the last two decades there has also been a massive expansion of Christianity, which has created a major impact among the Tani group of tribes and their political elites. A similar situation was reported among the tribes of Tirap and Changlang districts that border Nagaland, which is predominantly a Christian state. However, it has hardly made any impact on the Buddhist tribes of the state, and the least affected tribes are the Mishmis of Lohit and Dibang valley districts. Initially, Christianity faced very strong resistance from both the people and the state machinery, and there were a large number of cases where such resistance led to violence. The agenda of conversion and the complete negation of indigenous religious faith and practices and the creation of negative stereotyped notions about indigenous or traditional ways of tribal life created a huge culture shock that culminated in violent acts of resistance wherever missionaries tried to introduce Christianity. Nevertheless, Christian missionaries of different denominations went on pursuing their agenda, perhaps more vigorously, and were gradually able to convince some local people across the tribes. More importantly, they remained successful in obtaining political patronage in the state's power structure. Within the last two decades, Christianity, being a highly organized religion, successfully penetrated the large number of Tani tribes and brought transformation in the traditional religious landscape in the frontier state. However, the history of Christianity in this frontier state cannot be understood as fitting into a homogenous trans-contextual framework; rather, it has complex dimensions that have tribe-specific implications.

These factors provided the backdrop that has given birth to the reformist movements who coined a very popular slogan: "Loss of culture is the loss of identity." The indirect implication is that those who convert to Christianity lose their culture and hence their identity; therefore people should not convert. Having established that, by cleverly conflating the old indigenous practices with the new, reformed, and institutionalized forms, communities are then encouraged to join and support the new reformist movements. This process serves the dual purposes of stopping conversion to Christianity and giving community members the assurance that their culture and identity are being preserved and promoted. This seems reasonable because the movements claim to be following the old practices, only in a manner that matches the changing times.

The most popular and important movement culminated in the shape of the Donyi-Polo movement, which was initiated by the Adis under the leadership of Talom Rukbo, and it has given birth to *ganggings*. This was followed by the Nye-dar Namlo movement among the Nyishis and Danyi-Piilo among the Apatanis. All these movements received immediate patronage overtly or covertly from the Hindu nationalist organizations who are trying to create a strong base in this frontier state. It is evident that the Donyi-Polo movement made an impact crossing the cultural boundaries of Tani tribes, and as a result Rangfraism and Intayaism

emerged among the Tangsa and Idu Mishmi tribes of Changlang and Dibang valley districts of Arunachal Pradesh (CHAUDHURI 2012, 19–38; KHMUN 2006).

This has, perhaps, gone far beyond Elwin's apprehensions. Many of the images invented are largely Hinduized idols, though an attempt has been made to assimilate some local traits into such images based on their mythical characters. Moreover, in the name of reviving indigenous tribal religion, the way it was institutionalized also reveals or supplements how Hinduized norms were imposed consciously or in disguised ways. This, perhaps, has ultimately led to a "Third order reality"⁵ in Arunachal Pradesh. The complex sacred dynamics of this frontier state need to be understood through this contested space and through the ways the state as well as the tribal people are trying to negotiate with the emerging wider sociopolitical realities of life.

NOTES

1. I am indebted to linguist Ms. Lisa Lomdak of Arunachal Institute of Tribal Studies (AITS), Rajiv Gandhi University, for taking care of diacritic issues concerning the Tani group of tribes in Arunachal Pradesh.

2. Starting from DALTON's (1872) book, there are large numbers of ethnographic works done by colonial as well as postcolonial scholars and writers that give us a basic understanding of these Tani tribes of present-day Arunachal Pradesh (through facets such as traditional religious faith and practices of the tribes); space prevents me from discussing these in detail.

3. Talom Rukbo, as the Secretary of Adi Cultural and Literary Society, published a small booklet on "Donyi-Poloism" (RUKBO n.d.). He introduced the book as an attempt to answer in brief some of the typical questions posed by inquisitive critics and ordinary people about Donyi-Poloism. However, the book also offered explanations indicating the origin and ideas behind Donyi-Poloism.

4. The Nyishi, Adi, Galo, and Apatani constitute some of the well-known Tani groups in Arunachal Pradesh, India. All the Tani ethno-linguistic groups use Roman alphabets to write in their languages. However, it may be noted that the various linguistic communities do not follow a uniform code of orthography. The various linguistic groups differ in the use of the Roman alphabet to represent vowels such as [i] and [ə]. For instance, the Apatani literary society has standardized the use of alphabet "ii" to represent the vowel [i] and in Nyishi and Galo the alphabet "w" is used. The usage of alphabet "e" to function as the schwa [ə] and front vowel [e] is also observed. The consonants "ny" represent the palatal nasal [ɲ], like in the Nyishi word *nyedar*/jɛːdər/ and *donyi*/dɔɲi/. In the Adi word *gangging*, "ng" represents the velar nasal [ŋ], therefore *gangging* is articulated as /gəŋgɪŋ/.

5. The notion of "Third order reality" is used by A. C. Bhagabati to describe the nature of tribal transformation in Arunachal Pradesh that focuses on the blending of old and new elements rather than the complete elimination of old traditions or cultural elements from the social base of the tribes. More details can be found in BHAGABATI and CHAUDHURI (2008, 15–24).

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