



Anthropology

EXPLORING THE HEALING TRADITIONS OF TIBETANS: A STUDY ON MEN-TSEE-KHANG'S ETHNO MEDICINE PRACTICES AT MUNDGOD, KARNATAKA.

Pooja R Kulkarni*

Research Scholar, Department Of Studies In Anthropology, Karnatak University, Dharwad-580003, Karnataka *Corresponding Author

Jai Prabhakar S. C.

Assistant Professor, Centre For Multi-disciplinary Development Research, Dr. B R Ambedkar Nagar, Y. Shettar Colony, Dharwad- 580004, Karnataka

ABSTRACT

When it comes to promoting health and preventing, diagnosing, and treating illness, traditional medicine refers to the knowledge, abilities, and practices derived from indigenous cultural beliefs and experiences. The history and practice of Tibetan medicine are extensive and have been inherited through the years. Through ethnographic research, this study examines the methods used by Men-Tsee-Khang, a well-known Tibetan Medical Astrological institution. The study looks at the theory, diagnostic, and treatment methods of Tibetan medicine. Participant observation and practitioner and patient interviews were used in the research. The results demonstrate how Tibetan medicine integrates spiritual and bodily well-being and offers a distinct, all-encompassing approach to treatment.

KEYWORDS : Tibetan medicine; ethnographic research; spiritual well-being; Loong-Tripa-Baeken

INTRODUCTION

The term "traditional medicine" describes medical procedures that have been handed down through the years within particular tribes, communities, civilizations, and societies. These methods include numerous forms of therapy, herbal treatments, rituals, and spiritual activities that are used to identify, treat, and prevent certain illnesses (WHO, 2021). Throughout human history, traditional medicine has played a significant role and is being practiced widely worldwide. The history of traditional medicine dates back thousands of years, even before the development of modern medicine. Practitioners of traditional medicine diagnose and treat patients using a blend of traditional knowledge, abilities, and beliefs. This information is frequently transmitted from one generation to the next, guaranteeing the preservation and efficient use of the procedures and cures (NCCIH, 2021).

The comprehensive approach to healthcare that traditional medicine takes is one of its main characteristics. Practitioners of traditional medicine take into account all facets of a patient's health, including psychological, social, and spiritual issues in addition to physical symptoms. The utilization of natural medicines, such as plants, herbs, and other natural substances, is also emphasized in traditional medicine. When compared to contemporary medicine, which can have negative side effects and is frequently expensive, natural therapies are frequently thought to be a safer and more sustainable option (NIH, 2021).

The Present Study

The present study is about the Tibetan traditional medicine. The Tibetans migrated to India in the wake of the Chinese invasion in 1959. As their supreme head His Holiness the Dalai Lama had fled to India they too followed him. The arrival of Tibetan refugees into India began immediately after the entry of His Holiness the Dalai Lama into India in the year 1959. Tibetans migrated to different parts of Karnataka like Bylakuppe, Hunsur of Mysore district, Mundgod of Uttara kannada district and Kollegal of chamarajnagar district and are identified as refugees.

Many indigenous communities in India still use traditional medicine as a form of healthcare today. For centuries, people in North-eastern Indian communities have used home remedies for various diseases, ethnomedicine, and shamanism. The traditional medical system is similar to the practices of the north-eastern region of Tibetan culture. They adhere to their own customary medical procedures.

Keeping the above information in mind the present study explores the healing methods of Tibetan Ethno medicine of Men-Tsee-Khang located in Tibetan settlement of Mundgod, Uttara Kannada district of Karnataka, India.

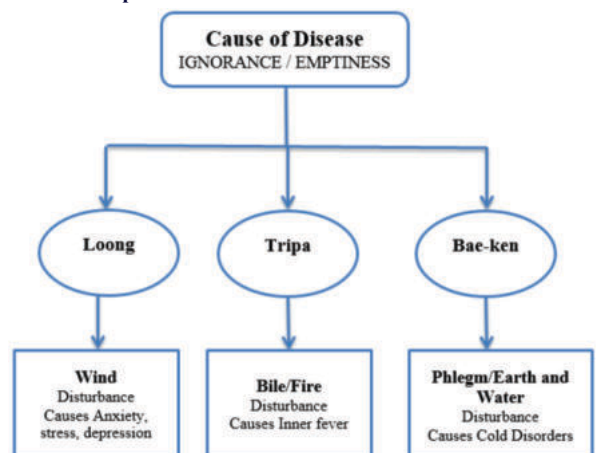
Tibetan Ethno Medicine

Sowa-Rigpa, another name for Tibetan medicine, is a traditional medical system that has been used in Tibet and the Himalayan regions for more than a millennium. Its foundation is the Buddhist

understanding of the human mind and body as an integrated whole, interdependence, and compassion (Dhondup, 2001). One of the world's oldest and most extensive medical systems is thought to be Tibetan medicine. It seeks to promote health and fend off illness by emphasizing the harmony of the body, mind, and spirit. It is predicated on the idea that a harmonious equilibrium between the environment, the body, and the mind leads to health and well-being (Rizvi and Biswas, 2010).

Tibetan medicine integrates traditional practices, including Ayurveda and indigenous Tibetan healing methods (Khangkar, 1999). The system emphasizes the importance of preventive medicine and offers treatments for various illnesses, including chronic diseases. One of the unique features of Tibetan medicine is its diagnostic system, which is based on the principles of the Five Elements and the Three Humors. The Five Elements (Earth, water, fire, air and space) represent the basic constituents of the physical world and are believed to correspond to specific organs and body systems. The Three Humors (Wind, Bile and Phlegm) are the three basic energies that govern the body and mind and an imbalance in any of these can lead to illness (Norbu, 2013).

Thematic Representation Of Cause Of A Disease.



Source: Field Survey

The concept of the Three Humors which are the fundamental energies that govern the body and mind. These are:

- **Wind (Loong):** Responsible for movement and circulation, both physically and mentally.
- **Bile (Tripa):** Responsible for digestion and metabolism.
- **Phlegm (Bae-kan):** Responsible for lubrication and stability.

According to Tibetan medicine, an imbalance in any of these three humors can lead to illness and disease. The goal of treatment is to restore balance and harmony to the body and mind.

History of Tibetan Ethno medicine

The Tibetan medical system is one of the world's oldest known medical traditions (Tsering and Dhonden, 2011). It is an integral part of Tibetan culture and has been developed through many centuries. It is believed that the origin of the Tibetan medical tradition is as old as civilization itself, because humankind has depended on nature for sustenance and survival, the instinctive urge for health and accumulated knowledge has guided us to discover certain remedies for common ailments from natural sources. For example, applying residual barley from chang (Tibetan wine) on swollen body parts, drinking hot water for indigestion and using melted butter for bleeding are some of the therapies that arose from practical experiences and gradually formed the basis for the art of healing in Tibet (Maryon, 2002). The Tibetan medical heritage is based on the book of the Four Tantras (r Gyud-bZhi), which remains the fundamental medical text even today.

The era from the beginning of human civilisation to the advent of Buddhism in Tibet can be termed as the pre-Buddhist era. During that time Bon tradition flourished in Tibet and Bon medical practice influenced and enriched the existing Tibetan Medical knowledge and practice (Kaptchuk, 1999). It has been clearly mentioned in a Bon text titled "Jam-ma tsa-drel" that around 200 B.C., (during the emergence of the first Tibetan King Nyatri Tsenpo) there lived 12 scholars of Bon tradition including a medical scholar who treated diseases through medication and therapy. This indicates that Tibetans practised medicine and there were Tibetan physicians even prior to the advent of Buddhism in Tibet (Kaptchuk, 2000).

The practitioners at Men-Tsee-Khang emphasized the importance of the holistic approach to health and well-being. They stated that the mind, body and environment are interconnected and that imbalances in one area can affect others. The practitioners also emphasized the importance of the patient's active participation in their own healing process.

History of Men-Tsee-Khang

Men Tsee Khang was founded in 1916 in Lhasa, Tibet, by the 13th Dalai Lama, Thubten Gyatso. The institute was established to preserve and promote the knowledge and practice of Tibetan medicine and astrology (Drungtso, 2010). Men Tsee Khang was later re-established in Dharamshala, India, in 1961, after the Chinese occupation of Tibet. Since then, Men Tsee Khang has expanded its operations to other parts of India and neighbouring countries. Tibetan medicine has a long and rich history (Tsering, 2017). The system was developed by Tibetan scholars and practitioners who combined Ayurveda and Tibetan medicine with indigenous Tibetan healing practices. Men-Tsee-Khang offers a wide range of services, including consultations, herbal medicines, acupuncture and cupping. This study aims to explore the practices of Men-Tsee-Khang and provide insight into the unique approach of Tibetan medicine. At present Men-Tsee-Khang has 58 branch clinics and 3 Wellness centres, The Men-Tsee Khang Institute in Mundgod was established in 1996 and is located in the Uttara Kannada district of Karnataka (Jansen, 2016).

Introduction To Tibetan Astro-science

"Tibetan Astro-Science" is the consolidated form of indigenous 'Ancient Tibetan Astro-Science'. It depicts the motions of the celestial bodies like the Sun, the Moon, the Planets and the constellations; and the consequential external change of the weather and the cycle of the four seasons. Subsequently, on this basis, it clearly reveals the internal content – the sentient beings – with the wisdom of embracing happiness and averting suffering (Norbu, 2011). It is also an inseparable element of traditional Tibetan Medicine and thus, an important feature of the traditional Tibetan Science of Healing. This science illustrates how both the Universe of the celestial bodies and this human body, come into existence by the assembly of the five elements.

Astro-Science of Ill-health

This astrological reading is mostly done for those patients who suffer from chronic diseases. When one has exhausted all means so that there are none left, this astrological reading can reveal undisclosed information about the cause of the ailment, its seriousness, what type of treatment is suitable and the remedial measures (Harke, 2015).

Astro-Science of Obstacle Year

This astrological reading emphasizes more ups and downs in a single year of a person. Various astrological methods are used to see the rise and fall of one's life force, health, prosperity and luck in that

particular year and corresponding remedial measures in the forms of personal prayers and amulets are also prescribed.

Methodology

This research was conducted through ethnographic methods, including participant observation and interviews. The researcher spent three months at Men-Tsee-Khang, observing consultations, and treatment sessions. The researcher also conducted semi-structured interviews with practitioners and patients.

The participants were selected through purposive sampling, based on their involvement in Tibetan medicine practices. The practitioners included doctors, acupuncturists and herbalists, while the patients were from various age groups and backgrounds. The interviews were conducted in English and Hindi, depending on the participant's preference.

The data collected from the participant observation and interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. The themes that emerged were categorized into four main areas: history and philosophy, diagnosis, treatment methods and challenges.

Diagnosis

Tibetan medicine diagnosis involves a comprehensive examination of the patient's physical, mental and spiritual well-being. The diagnosis includes observing the patient's appearance, pulse and tongue, as well as asking questions about their lifestyle, diet and medical history. The practitioners also use various diagnostic tools, including astrology, urine analysis and palpation (Turin, 2001).

The diagnosis aims to identify the imbalances in the three senses of humour and determine the root cause of the patient's illness. The practitioners stated that the diagnosis is a crucial step in the treatment process as it helps to personalize the treatment plan for each patient.

Treatment Methods

Tibetan medicine offers various treatment methods, including herbal medicines, acupuncture and cupping. The practitioners at Men-Tsee-Khang focused on the use of natural and organic ingredients in their herbal medicines and the importance of balancing the three senses of humour in the prescription. Acupuncture and cupping are used to stimulate the body's natural healing process and restore the balance of the three senses of humour. The practitioners stated that these techniques also help to release energy blockages and promote blood flow to the affected areas. The practitioners also emphasized the importance of lifestyle changes and diet modifications in the healing process. They stated that a healthy lifestyle and diet are crucial in maintaining the balance of the three senses of humour and preventing illnesses (Men-Tsee-Khang, 2022).

The Men-Tsee-Khang produced different medicines of three different forms.

I. Decoction

It is used in the beginning phase of illness and to ripen the fever or to differentiate the nature of the illness. It gives fast results. And generally, it prevents and treats colds and influenza. Four different types of decoctions are produced by this department.

II. Powder

It gives faster results than pills and it is used after decoction. Eighteen different types of powders are produced by this department.

III. Pills

It is especially effective in chronic disorders. Small pills can swallow and bigger pills should be chewed.

Tibetan Medicines:

1. Bumzed 25:

- **Use:** This medicine is typically used to improve overall vitality and energy.
- **Indications:** It is often prescribed for conditions related to general debility, fatigue, and low energy levels.

2. Klu-men:

- **Use:** Klu-men is known for its detoxifying and purifying properties.
- **Indications:** It is used for skin diseases, inflammation, and conditions caused by blood impurities.

3. Men-che:

- **Use:** Men-che is used to promote digestive health.
- **Indications:** It is commonly prescribed for digestive disorders such as indigestion, bloating, and loss of appetite.

4. Zang-drug chema:

- **Use:** This medicine is used to support the liver and improve liver function.
- **Indications:** It is indicated for liver disorders, jaundice, and detoxification of the liver.

Eight Different Precious Pills Produced at Men Tsee Khang:**1. Rinchen Drangjor Rilnag Chenmo:**

- **Use:** Known for its rejuvenating and revitalizing properties.
- **Indications:** It is used for chronic diseases, general weakness, and to improve overall health and longevity.

2. Rinchen Ratna Samphel:

- **Use:** This pill is used to enhance cognitive functions and mental clarity.
- **Indications:** It is prescribed for neurological disorders, memory loss, and to improve mental focus and concentration.

3. Rinchen Tsajor Chenmo:

- **Use:** It has detoxifying and cleansing properties.
- **Indications:** Used for blood disorders, skin diseases, and to purify the body from toxins.

4. Rinchen Mangjor Chenmo:

- **Use:** Known for its ability to enhance immunity and overall vitality.
- **Indications:** It is used to strengthen the immune system and for chronic illnesses and general debility.

5. Rinchen Tsotru Dhashel:

- **Use:** This pill is used for its balancing effects on the body's energies.
- **Indications:** It is prescribed for metabolic disorders and conditions involving an imbalance of bodily humors (wind, bile, and phlegm).

6. Rinchen Yunying 25:

- **Use:** Known for its calming and sedative properties.
- **Indications:** It is used for anxiety, stress, insomnia, and other nervous system-related disorders.

7. Rinchen Jumar 25:

- **Use:** This pill is used to improve digestive health and overall metabolism.
- **Indications:** It is prescribed for digestive disorders, obesity, and related metabolic conditions.

8. Rinchen Chakril Chenmo:

- **Use:** Known for its anti-inflammatory and pain-relieving properties.
- **Indications:** It is used for chronic pain, arthritis, and inflammatory conditions.

These medicines and precious pills are part of a holistic approach in Tibetan medicine that considers the balance of bodily energies, diet, lifestyle, and the environment. It is essential to consult with a qualified Tibetan medicine practitioner to receive appropriate diagnoses and treatments tailored to individual needs.

Challenges

Tibetan medicine at Men-Tsee-Khang is facing several challenges. The first challenge is the lack of recognition and integration of Tibetan medicine into the mainstream healthcare system (Bradley, 2008). The practitioners stated that there is a need for more research and collaboration with Western medicine to promote the integration of Tibetan medicine (Clavey and Gadacz, 2017).

The second challenge is the preservation of the ancient tradition and knowledge of Tibetan medicine. The rapid modernization and globalization of Tibetan society have led to the loss of traditional knowledge and practices. They emphasized the importance of preserving and promoting the tradition to future generations.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the practices of Men-Tsee-Khang, a renowned Tibetan medicine institution, through ethnographic research. The study revealed the unique and holistic approach to healing that Tibetan medicine offers, as well as its integration of spiritual and physical well-being. The study also highlighted the challenges faced by the practitioners and the importance of preserving this ancient tradition.

The findings of this study can contribute to the understanding and promotion of Tibetan medicine as a valuable healthcare system. The study emphasizes the importance of collaboration and integration between traditional and Western medicine and the preservation of ancient traditions and knowledge. Future research can focus on the effectiveness and safety of Tibetan medicine treatments and the integration of Tibetan medicine into mainstream healthcare systems.

REFERENCES

- Bradley, T. S. (2008). *The Roots of Tibetan Medicine*. Snow Lion Publications.
- Clavey, S., & Gadacz, R. R. (2017). Chinese and Tibetan medicine: A comparison of two systems of traditional medicine from an ethnographic perspective. *Anthropology & Medicine*, 24(1), 24-39.
- Dhonden, Y. (2001). *Tibetan medicine: Ancient wisdom for modern health and healing*. New York: Snow Lion Publications.
- Dhondup, K. (2001). Tibetan Medicine: A Brief Overview. *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, 7(5), 383-389. doi: 10.1089/10755301750164310
- Drungtso, T. T. (2010). *The History of Tibetan Medicine*. Men-Tsee-Khang.
- Harke, M. (2015). The practice of Tibetan medicine: A descriptive account of contemporary practice in Dharamsala, India. *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine*, 11(1), 37.
- Janes, C. R. (2010). The powers of Tibetan medicine. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 24(2), 227-255.
- Jansen, G. (2016). Tibetan Medicine. In K. Kendler & J. Parnas (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Psychopathology* (pp. 1-4). Springer International Publishing. doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-43854-9_1987-1
- Kapchuk, D. (1999). *Tibetan Medicine: The Buddhist Way of Healing*. Snow Lion Publications.
- Kapchuk, T. J. (2000). *The web that has no weaver: Understanding Chinese medicine*. Contemporary books.
- Men-Tsee-Khang. (2021). About Men-Tsee-Khang. Retrieved from <https://www.men-tsee-khang.org/about/> accessed on Dec 15th, 2022.
- National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health. (2021). Traditional Medicine: In Depth. Retrieved from <https://www.nccih.nih.gov/health/traditional-medicine-in-depth> accessed on April 19th, 2023.
- National Institutes of Health. (2021). Traditional Medicine. Retrieved from https://www.nlm.nih.gov/research/umls/sourceleasedocs/current/MDR/content-def/MDR_TRADITIONAL_MEDICINE.html On April 19th, 2023.
- Norbu, T. (2013). Sowa Rigpa: The Science of Healing. *Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies*, 9, 1-14.
- Norbu, Y., & Thurman, R. A. F. (2011). *Medicine Buddha Teachings*. Shambhala Publications.
- Rizvi, S. M. D., & Biswas, S. K. (2010). Traditional Tibetan Medicine: A Review. *International Journal of Pharmaceutical Sciences and Research*, 1(9), 1-6.
- Tashi, T., & Dorjee, K. (2012). *Tibetan medicine in the contemporary world: Global politics of medical knowledge and practice*. Routledge.
- Tsering, D. (2017). The Development and Current State of Tibetan Medicine. In *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, 23(3), pp. 164-168. doi: 10.1089/acm.2016.0259
- Turin, M. (2001). Knowledge and practice in Tibetan medicine In *Health, disease and society: An introduction to medical anthropology* (pp. 148-172). Alta Mira Press.
- World Health Organization. (2019). *Traditional Medicine*. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/health-topics/traditional-medicine> accessed on April 19th, 2023.