

Cosmology, World View and Ecology among North-East Indian Tribes: A Critique

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ABSTRACT: Religions of the tribes show enormous variety in terms of belief, ritual, spiritualism and symbolic imagery, as also in enduring beliefs surrounding cosmology, myth and ultimate human-nature harmony. Today, the study of tribal religion has emerged as part of a new global phenomenon, a part of a vibrant globalizing discourse. A growing body of anthropological scholarship is currently trying to make sense of these developments, mainly of the resurgences of indigenous societies in an increasingly interconnected world, whereby to explore the indigenous expressions such as harmony with nature, holism, shamanism and animism. Moving away from old stereotypes, this review article focuses attention on what Clifford has called the emergence of “a new public persona and globalizing voice – protection of sacred sites, and transnational activism”. It is argued that “Indigenous religion” needs to be situated in the new and “global form of religiosity – associated with those defined in international law as “indigenous peoples”.

INTRODUCTION

In anthropology the term indigenous refers to small-scale tribal societies. Hence, the two terms ‘indigenous’ and tribe are being used as interchangeable in new writings¹. The term ‘indigenous’ is a generalized reference to the thousands of tribes, aborigines and indigenous people who have distinct languages, kinship systems, mythologies, ancestral memories, and homelands. The author has argued that there are enough evidences which demonstrate that India’s tribes people are ‘the’ indigenous people of India, who are forced to remain marginalized. Despite India’s defiance in global forums, India’s apex Supreme Court in a 2011 verdict has recognized and labeled India’s ‘scheduled tribes’ as the ‘indigenous people of India’ (Das, 2015). There

is a greater urgency today to bring the ‘strategic essentialism’ of indigeneity within anthropological advocacy paradigm as a political tool for empowering the marginalized tribes. A growing body of anthropological scholarship is currently trying to make sense of these developments, mainly the resurgences of indigenous societies in an increasingly interconnected world (Alia, 2010; Cadena and Starn, 2007; Graham and Penny, 2014; Niezen, 2009, 2003). Resurgence of indigenous societies is a work performed through global networks and on local grounds, and it involves struggles against dominant regimes, the reclaiming and renewal of heritage, and reconnections with lost lands (Niezen, 2003, 2009). These developments have led to the identification of the ‘indigenous religion’ in the globalizing discourse, wherein it is reflected in indigenous expressions such as harmony with nature, healing and holism, antiquity and spirituality, shamanism and animism. As this

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review indicates, there is a new trend within anthropology which has located indigenous spirituality in the holistic context that grounds the traditional environmental knowledge evident in the cosmologies of indigenous peoples.

Taking clue from the above conceptual paradigm, this critique intends to examine the pattern of indigenous worldview, ecology and cosmology, which shape the basic component of tribal religions. In doing so it discusses the earlier and novel paradigms of indigenous religiosity, as revealed in various writings, and tries to situate the contemporary thinking around ecological insight of spirituality in indigenous / tribal societies. In order to substantiate the argument, a few ethnographic examples, drawn mostly from north-east India are presented to illuminate the spheres of human-nature relationship and environmental ethics as reflected in the worldview, nature worship, ritual, folklore and cosmological myths which are all entrenched in tribal religions. At the end the article reviews how the term 'indigenous religion' is fast emerging as a globalizing discourse.

A brief discussion of anthropology of religion may be imperative to gain a perspective for discussing issues of cosmology, myth and ultimate human-nature harmony. Religions show enormous variety in terms of belief, ritual, spiritualism and symbolic imagery. In a vast range of societies studied by anthropologists, concepts and formulations of gods, deities, supreme creator, guardian spirits and culture heroes have been applied profusely (Firth, '96). Belief has been a prominent theme within the anthropology of religion from Tylor to Durkheim, Evens Pritchard to Turner, and in more recent times Rodney Needham and Clifford Geertz. Efforts at defining religion, ranging from Tylor's 1871 definition of religion as "the belief in spirit beings" to the more intricate definitions offered by Clifford Geertz and Melford E. Spiro, nonetheless have met with considerable resistance (Morris, '87; Klass, '95; Saler, '93).

In classical anthropology the definitions tend to focus on religion in 'traditional' societies. In this they put emphasis on the interaction with supernatural entities (Kottak, '96). Edward Burnett Tylor saw religion as a way to understand the unexplainable (Kottak, '96: 260). The most important point of Durkheim is that religion can be seen as something

sacred or as he puts it: a unified set of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden, — beliefs and practices which unite [into] one single moral community, all those who adhere to them (Durkheim [1915] 1964: 37 cited in Morris 1987). Durkheim sees religion as something collective, while magic would be typified by individual practice. At one stage, the anthropologists turned to seeking explanations of religion within its social context (Hendry, '99:119-120), defining religion as a "reflection of social organization" and further the religion as a "conceptual system". Clifford Geertz indeed regards religion standing as the expression of the cosmological order underlining and sustaining all other aspects of society and culture, making it supremely important for the anthropologists to correctly map the meaning and coherence of beliefs before seeking to understand the effects and functions of religion (Dein, 2014).

INDIGENOUS SPIRITUALISM, ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND WORLD VIEW

Indigenous spirituality is fundamental to many indigenous people's identity and worldview. Spirituality, a wider concept than religion, embraces ideologies, attitudes and actions that motivate humans in their quest for deeper meaning and experience about life. Scholars use the term 'spirituality' to refer specifically to the philosophy that underpins indigenous ontologies (ways of being) and epistemologies (ways of knowing) and, therefore, indigenous personhood (Grieves, 2009). Indigenous spirituality is animistic and in an animistic world everything is interconnected, people, plants and animals, landforms and celestial bodies are part of a larger reality. In an animistic world everything is interconnected, people, plants and animals, landforms and celestial bodies are part of a larger reality. In this world, nothing is inanimate, everything is alive; animals, plants, and natural forces, all are energized by a spirit. As such, humans are on an equal footing with nature; are part of nature and are morally obligated to treat animals, plants and landforms with respect. As such, humans are on an equal footing with nature; are part of nature and are morally obligated to treat animals, plants and landforms with respect

(<https://www.australianstogether.org.au/discover/indigenous-culture/aboriginal-spirituality/>).

Worldview is a specific way of seeing the world. In indigenous / tribal societies there is a deep connectivity with the earth. The worldview of different indigenous cultures and peoples varies from place to place, but most of them share this core value of deep connectivity with the earth. Schlitz *et al.* (2010) argues that worldview dictates the way people view the world, influencing their behaviour in relationship to society and the world around them. It is a collection of values and beliefs about life and the universe that is common to a group of people (Our Worldviews, 2016).

Many indigenous spiritual and philosophical traditions express ethics and respect for nonhuman life, particular places and landscape features and for the Earth itself (Bron Taylor, *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, 2005). "In many cultures, the earth is held in high esteem for its generous support of human, plant and animal life. It wields supernatural powers which make it an object of worship. Indigenous cultures indeed survive around the world, usually in communities defined by environmental rather than geo-political boundaries. Indigenous people have adapted to modern challenges and innovations while holding tenaciously and courageously to their ways. The core of these ways is deeply connected to, and arises from, the Earth" (<http://tapestryinstitute.org/indigenous-worldview/>).

Tribes people attribute enormous importance to ancestral lands, sacred geography, and local sacred sites, which are seen as portals to the primordial past. Great value is invested in kinship obligations. The sacred traditions are transmitted principally by oral narratives about prior worlds, when communications between humans and other-than-human beings (animals, spirits, and deities) were normal.

Environmental ethics in tribal societies are visualised in people's 'closeness' with nature and intricate relationships between people's physical, spiritual and human worlds and the values that people have about their traditional system for food, rituals, totems and the kinship system that involve responsibility to care about different components of nature (Altman, 2004).

In tribal societies, divine power is rooted in environment and natural world. Nature worship, so common in tribal societies, signifies the veneration of natural phenomena – for example, celestial objects such as the sun and moon and terrestrial objects such as water and fire. Tribes people have an extensive knowledge of the natural resources that surround them and have often adopted very complex methods and technologies to manage their habitat in a sustainable manner. Applying their indigenous environmental ethics, native knowledge and home-grown practices these people pursue and ensure perfect environmental sustainability (Brudtland, 1989; Adams, 2001; Ikerd, 2005). According to IUCN (IUCN, '97), "Indigenous knowledge systems are usually embedded in naturalistic epistemologies and belief systems. This knowledge encompasses spiritual relationships with the natural environment and such relationships are reflected in language, social organizations, values, institutions and laws".

In the worldview of indigenous/tribes people shaman-priests play crucial role in conservation of environment, through conversations with mountains, rivers, and plants. A shaman's knowledge of plants, animals, terrain, and weather patterns is not merely empirical learning, but clearly has a religious perspective as well. Shamans transform the external environment of mountains, rivers, and biodiversity into inner experiential landscapes that resonate with the surrounding animate world, weaving together the outer environment of all beings with the shaman's inner psychic world, thus generating empathy and commitment from the people (Grim, 2005).

The term 'ancestor' is used in anthropology to designate those forebearer who are remembered, and to denote specific religious practices as a part of such phrases as 'ancestor cult' or 'ancestor worship'. Ancestor worship is a phrase used to denote religious practices concerned with the belief that dead forebear can in some way influence the living. In his study of ancestor worship among the Tallensi of Ghana, which is very typical of ancestor worship in other parts of Africa, Fortes (Fortes, '59) stresses how the worship which a patrilineal descendant should carry out reflects, though in a subtly changed way, the relationship of father and son when living. Two forms of ancestor worship can be identified in the

anthropological literature. One is a domestic cult, which is observed by the family in dedication to its recent ancestors rather than remote ones. The other is observed by the descent group in dedication to its common ancestors in the remote past.

Cosmology, Ecology and Indigenous Religion

The science define cosmology as the science or study of the origins and evolution of the universe, while in anthropology it is said to be the set of knowledge, beliefs, interpretations and practices of a society or culture related to explanations of the past, present and future of the universe as well as the role and meaning of humans, life, and the world within the cosmos (Cosmology Blog, 2008). In general, social anthropologists refer to cosmology as the system of beliefs and practices of a people (Leach, '82). The cosmology of people gives them a sense of belonging, meaning, and purpose, exerting a powerful influence on the behaviour and choices of members of the society (Kehinde, 2013). Cosmology is a crucial component of indigenous religion. **Cosmology** entails ideas about the universe and the place of humans in the universe. Cosmology involves explanations of the past, present and future and it deals with the origins as well as the destiny of humans and of other forms of existence. All cultures have cosmologies which can be religious or non-religious, as means to interpret a society's entrenchment in the universe, earth, and biosphere and within humanity. The cosmologies of indigenous societies invoke respect for nature and for human wellbeing (<http://timeo-habla.blogspot.in/2008/09/cosmology.html>).

All cultures have cosmologies which can be religious or non-religious, as means to interpret a society's rootedness in the universe, earth, and biosphere and within humanity. The cosmologies of indigenous and traditional societies help in establishing the balanced coexistence between all parts of the universe, because people, ecosystems, the biosphere and cosmos are defined as being composed of common components of matter, energy and spirit. Among the world's 400 million indigenous peoples there are over 6,000 languages and equal or more numbers of cosmologies, and many indigenous cultures, languages and cosmologies are now greatly threatened by extermination due to acculturation and

forced displacement by dominant and majoritarian cultures and languages, if present trends are not deterred (Aveni and Urton, '82; Douglas, '70).

Tribal cosmologies relate earth and sky, the elements, the directions, the seasons, and mythic transformers to lands that they have occupied since ancient times. Guided by these cosmological relationships, tribes people have creation stories related to their homelands, and they date their presence in those places to times when spirit beings traversed the world, transformed themselves at will between human and animal form, created their ancestors, and contoured the landscape.

Cosmology and ecology are interlinked. In indigenous perception, natural world, the universe, and ecology play significant roles in establishing balance in social sphere and assuring ecological and cosmological harmonies. The physical environment is accorded a sacred status and sacred groves and sacred landscapes are widespread. The existence of a Supreme Being, a powerful creator and protector, is observable in all tribal religions. All tribal religions in northeast, like elsewhere, involve elaborate rituals and sacrifices of egg and a cock. Rice beer oblations are part of rituals (Das, 2003). Ritual practices and oral narratives are part of indigenous cosmology. Ritual is but one example of the discourse in which the pragmatic and the religious, the material and the spiritual are interwoven (Grim, 2005).

Animism in a New Avatar

The notion of 'animism' is reformulated in modern anthropological discourse to acknowledge and theorize the ethnographic fact of beliefs that attribute personhood (or "soul", anima) to non-human beings (animals, plants, or rocks). Credit goes to French anthropologist Philippe Descola (2005, 2006) for installing this perspective. Thus, revived the comprehensive discourse on "new animism" clearly attributes superior environmental ethics to "animist" cultures (Bekoff, 2010; Harvey, 2005, 2006; Taylor, 2010). The "neo-animism" debate without doubt has contributed immensely to our understanding of the relations human beings maintain with their non-human environment (*cf.* Turner, 2009).

Tribes people believe that everything in this world has life and is animate whether earth, hills, river,

plants, minerals, animals and other natural phenomena. There are souls who influence and interfere in the life of the living persons. There are within tribes, sacred specialists including shaman, diviner and medicine-men/women. Often one person combines many roles as ritual expert, medicine-man, diviner and forecaster of different kinds (Das, 2003). The application of the term animism no longer depends on notions about 'spirits' or 'supernatural' entities. It has been found helpful in drawing attention to ontologies and epistemologies in which life is encountered in a wide community of persons only some of whom are human. Certainly this new usage shares with Tylor's discussion a concern with materiality and, in this, links animism to wider contestations, for example, about environmentalism and the dichotomous opposition of culture and nature (Harvey, 2005). The 'tribal' religions indeed are not just 'animistic', confined to veneration of celestial objects, sun and moon, and terrestrial objects such as water and fire. There are precise ethical norms, social and jural norms associated with kinship obligations and well-defined 'customary laws' interpreted by clan-lineage elders and chiefs, who are custodians of tribal laws and religious beliefs (Das, 2003). In recent years, through various indigenous, anthropological, and philosophical writings, a need for reconsideration of animism is voiced. Confronted by the diminishment of ecological diversity, by assaults on 'natural environments' and by the seemingly ever-increasing dominance of humanity over this planet, there are those who find the term 'animism' helpful in recognizing alternatives (Harvey, 2005).

COSMOLOGY AND NATURE WORSHIP IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

In north-east India the blessed human-nature linkage and peoples' concern for ecological conservation as also their environmental ethics are distinctly visible in its pristine form (Das, 2003, 2014). Forest, land and water sources remain crucial sources of economic sustenance as also sacred elements. Nature-dependent tribes people of north-east endow natural resources with divine character and animistic attributes; sometimes animals are attributed with mythical-symbolical attributes. The tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, thus, refer to water, egg, cloud,

rock, wood and the great personage as the self-existing elements of the first order. According to the tradition, from these were created elements of the second order: earth, sky, sun, moon, wind, fire and all living creatures. The third order of elements was then formed: colour, direction, form, smell, etc. The fourth order was attributed to knowledge (Elwin, '68).

Nature Worship and Mythological Cosmology in Assam

Cosmology exists as wide-ranging and fascinating notion and is entrenched in the legends of the Karbi and Bodo tribes people of Assam. The Karbis sing 'Masira Kohir' during the death ritual Chomangkan narrating legend of human creation. Masira Kohir (also called Mosera) refers to a mythical bird, voplakpi laying hundreds of eggs in order to give birth to the Karbi and other human groups. From the thousands of eggs of the Plakvut couple, some were laid by the erect rocks, some laid by the precipices. Out of these eggs emerged the Karbis, Chomangs (Khasis), Ahoms, Nakas (Nagas) and numerous other human groups (Karbi Studies, 2008: 8). Another Karbi folktale 'Karbi Keplang' describes the creation of earth and water, rivers and mountains, flora and fauna, and men and women by divine intervention of 'Hemphu' and 'Mukrang', the Karbi deities. According to this myth Hemphu-Mukrang duo created the first Karbi parents 'Sum' and 'Sang' who in turn gave birth to five brothers who established principal clans of the tribe. In the 'Mosera' tradition, creation is attributed to 'eggs', but in Karbi Keplang myth, 'Hemphu' and 'Mukrang' deities are the creators. (Karbi Studies, 2008: 8).

The author had studied the folk culture and economic transformation among the Karbis during 1983-84, in some selected villages of the Lumbajong and Howraghat development blocks, such as Rongkangthir and Era Gaon. A popular Karbi myth collected by author from Rongkangthir village tells that at the beginning of creation all the inhabitants of earth and animals, and they spoke a common language and lived together. Author was informed that there is a 'karjong' (soul) in every living and non-living being such as humans, animals, birds, as also water, rocks, hills, forests etcetera. The superior harmonized and humanistic philosophy of the Karbi indigenous faith

is visible in the rituals conducted during killing of any domestic creature like fowl, goat or pig for food. Such ritual is conducted to seek clemency from the gods. The Karbis believe that death means the absence of 'karjong' (soul) from the body. Hence elaborate death rituals are performed so that the soul may be bid fare-well (Sarma and Barpujari, 2011). During the 1980s the Karbis were still pursuing indigenous religion, which contained elements of shamanist 'mysticism', ancestor worship and sacrificial and rice-beer oblations to the outer deities and village deities (Das, '89:175; Das, '94:210-211). The author was surprised to note the unique Karbi philosophy of 'celebration' associated with Karbi funerary ritual. One Karbi scholar Dharamsing Teron (2008) has rightly stated that the death to a Karbi is only a transition to a new identity, both physical and spiritual — through time and space. 'Chomkan' or 'Karhi' is a celebration of death. 'Charhepi', the dominant female character of the festivities, guides the soul of the dead to the 'village of ancestors'. Beyond death, there is life, connected by the immortal soul that has many avatars. 'Cho-jun' is an essential part of the ritual of 'ancestor propitiation' in the Karbi religious tradition. 'Sining' is a term that describes sky. Dharamsing Teron has stated that there is no corresponding term that gives any nearest meaning to 'hell'. 'Norok' is borrowed from Assamese Hindus by the Karbis. 'Hi:̀- Arnam' is a phrase coined by the Karbi ancestors to show the incongruous domains of 'divinity', demon and deity. The unity and duality of the 'negative' and 'positive' forces and the 'balance' between them are what constitutes the philosophical basis of the Karbi folk religion' (Dharamsing Teron, 2008).

Elements of Hinduism had only nominally entered into the Karbi culture and as the author had observed tribal deities and tribal rituals remained intact in Rongkangthir village, though a few Hindu deities were worshipped too, along with sacred trees, sacred forests, sacred animals and sacred streams, were venerated in the village. Further, the Karbi villagers venerated innumerable supernatural powers both benevolent and malevolent and they held rituals throughout the year where the sacrifice of fowls, and sometimes even goat or pig, and offerings of harlang (rice beer) were indispensable. The author had also studied the Karbis living in Dimapur rural areas,

adjoining Assam Karbi district. Here tribal religion is followed and Donri is their main tribal festival. Both tribal god Hemptu and Hindu god Shiva were worshipped. The Karbis here also worshiped other Hindu deities and exchanged food and water with the Hindus, though the Karbi elders and priests did not accept food from the Hindus (Das, '94:211). The Karbis living in interiors of Assam forest areas do pursue passionately the environmental ethics, cosmologies and religious beliefs of the past. At the same time new forces have led to the gradual erosion of traditional belief systems (Sarma and Barpujari, 2011).

Among the Bodos of Assam, five cosmological elements of Bar (Air), San (Sun), Ha (Earth), Or (Fire) and Okhrang (Sky) shape and exemplify the Bathou religion of the Bodos, who call themselves as "Saba mwdai ni fissa" (children of five elements) and "Badosa" (children of five gods). The creator of these five elements is called *Bathou Bwrai* or the God. In the Bodo religious conviction nature-worship is associated with mythical harmonious unity of earth and sky. The following verse (<http://thebodotribe.blogspot.in/2016>) exemplifies this unity:

*"Oh, father God Bwrai Bathou;
Save your ignorant children;
You are the Creator, Preserver and Destroyer.
You are the holder of the three bhuban (heaven, earth
and hell)
You are the one in three and three in one"*

The plant Sijou (*Euphorbia indica*) is central element of nature focused in Bathou religion. The Sijou plant is the living symbol of *Bathou Bwrai*, the supreme god. The Bathou altar is the main place of Bathou worship. Bodo families must have a Bathousali in the north-eastern corner of the courtyard. Apart from this, each village has to set up a Bathou altar in the community land, where should be planted the sijou plant and fenced with 18 pairs of small bamboos strips folded with five fastening which symbolizes five ethical-spiritual principles of Bathouism as well as the eighteen gurus and deities (Barmahalia, 2012). The Bodos do not harm natural objects like trees, earth or soil during 'Amthisua' ritual as they believe that this period is a period of menstruation of Mother Earth. Influenced by mythological cosmology and folk beliefs Bodos follow the taboos associated with

totemic clans such as Mosahary (a tiger clan) Ouary (bamboo clan), Boisomuthiary, (Earth clan), Goyari (areca nut clan), and Hajoary (hill clan), etcetera. Clan members never harm they protect their totem. Whenever Mosahary clan members learn of the death of a tiger they believe that one of their family member has died. So they perform a ritual called 'Udrainai' (a 'purification' rite) in their family praying for the departed soul (Madhurima Goswami, www.borjournals.com).

Human Nature, Animal Harmony among Adi, Aka and Other Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland

Among the Adi Milang tribe a mythical figure 'Keyum' occupies important position (Singh, 1995: 89). Several myths are common among various Adi tribes, who now collectively follow Donyi Polo religion. *Keyum-Kero* (emptiness) is name of a parable popular among the Adi tribes people of Arunachal Pradesh. *Keyum-Kero, a longish narrative, helps these people to trace the origin of the cosmos and of all the living things of nature, including the humankind. Human-nature interconnection is depicted in following passage drawn from Keyum-Kero:*

"In the beginning emptiness (*keyum-Kero*) pervaded the cosmos. A tiny, imperceptible patch of darkness gradually developed from *Keyum-Kero*. It was called *Yumkang*. After a long time, that imperceptible patch of darkness generated *Kasi* (nothingness). It had no form, no size and no existence. Then, *Kasi* brought forth *Siang*, from which particles resembling clouds, known as *Bomuk*, came out. It hovered in the space known as *Mukseng*, where *Sedi* and *Melo*, the first physical manifestations emerged from the incomprehensible *Keyum-Kero*. *Sedi*, a female turned into the earth, while *Melo*, the male became the sky. In order to continue the creative process, they married each other and began to produce various offspring in the world. Their first progenies were Sepi Yokmo and Sepang Yokmo who were gods of smiths (ironsmiths, silversmiths, goldsmiths). *Dinom Yokmo* was born next. He was the originator of wild birds and animals. *Sedi* and *Melo* also created *Sengo Orne*, the god of light; *Yidum Bote*, *Doying Bote*, *Litung* and *Limang*. *Litung* and *Limang* married and they gave birth to *Pedong Nane*, who married *Yidum Bote*, the God of wind, and they together gave birth

to millions of offspring who filled the earth. Their children were the divinities, human beings, snakes, frogs, monkeys and many other beings" (<http://northeastdiariesmerinmathew.blogspot>).

As seen in above myth, the cosmological descend from sky to earth is a common theme found in folklore of most tribes. A myth common among several tribes of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam narrates the chronology of human origin, and human descend from sky to earth by means of ladders. The Akas believe that different ladders were used and the royal blood came down through a golden ladder and shaped the 'royal' clans, while the remaining Akas came using a silver ladder. In another version of the folktale, it is believed that the Monpas were given a ladder of iron. Similarly, bamboo ladder was used by several communities such as the Cacharis (Assam) and the Khoas used a plantain ladder (Thakur, '99).

Among most Naga tribes we find myths depicting common origin of human, animal and forest. It is particularly popular among the Angami, Chakhesang and Mao Nagas, who have many similarities in terms of pattern of social structure, kinship values and elevated status of elders. The Rengma and Konyak Nagas also have identical myths. The Rengma Nagas believe that the Nagas and the tiger are the sons of the same mother. On the other hand, the Konyak Nagas treat the tiger as a family member. These beliefs are best illustrated in the following myth:

"Once upon a time, the god, tiger and human lived together as a happy family. They lacked nothing. Everything was abundant. They had no fear of death. They spoke the same language. The tiger was elder and the human was younger. One day, the human told to the family members that when the mother died, he should live in the village. But the tiger argued that he being the eldest should live in the village. One morning, the mother was sick, and the god requested that the tiger bring some good meat for her. After the tiger left to hunt, their mother passed away. Hence, the god and human quickly buried the mother under their fire place (oven) and start cooking food on the burial place. The tiger arrived with deer meat. The tiger asked for their mother. The god said to the tiger that their mother died and disappeared within a twinkle of an eye. The tiger continued to insist that he should live in the village and human should live in the jungle. So the god said to both of them that they will compete: the one who touches banana leaf at a distance first

would be allowed to live in the village. The tiger was extremely happy because he was very sure that the human cannot compete with him. However, the god made a bow for the human to shoot the banana leaf from a distance. On that fixed day, they competed and as instructed by the god, the human shot his arrow from a distance and claimed that he touched the banana leaf first. So the god asked tiger to live in jungle to take care of animals and birds, and the human was asked to live in the village. The god said that he would be watching over them and extending help to both of them. However, the tiger was not willing to go to the jungle so the god gave a buffalo horn to the human to blow at the back of the tiger. Human blew the horn loudly. It frightened the tiger, who ran into the forest and lived there” (Das and Imchen, '94:20-21).

*Donyi-Polo: Sun-Moon Faith and
Nature Worship*

Donyi-Polo faith is largely a reformed syncretic religious sect based on common beliefs, myths and practices preexisting among fifteen sub-tribes within Adi conglomeration, and Apatani, Nishi, Hill Miri, and Mishing. A major factor which brought together several tribes together to form a larger sect in Arunachal Pradesh was their distress over gradual erosion of indigenous cultures and particularly the rapid expansion of Christianity (Rukbo, '98). One important feature which united and drew together several tribes was their belief in common cosmological myths. Fact remains that most tribes of Arunachal Pradesh believe that they are descended from the union of the earth and sky, who are regarded as wife and husband (Elwin, '68). The supreme quality of Donyi-Polo faith is seen in the harmonic integration of humankind with Sun (Donyi) and the Moon (Polo); hence this faith is referred to as the 'religion of the Sun and the Moon'. In this religion Sun (Donyi) is regarded as Mother while Moon (Polo) is father. This shared belief is reflected in the phrase “Donyi O, Polo Ome”, meaning “children of the sun and the moon” (<http://www.oshonews.com/2014/>). Several public leaders like Talom Rukbo highlighted the threat to indigenous faiths and they played major role in giving shape to Donyi-Polo and contributing towards sacred literature Bédang (Ering, Oshong, 1994, 2010, Borang, 2008, Rukbo, Talom. 1998). Since 1990s temples have been built in entire Arunachal Pradesh by followers of Donyi Poloism. All Tanis including

Adi tribes believe that all celestial bodies including 'earth' originate from one source, Keyum (nothingness or the void). Donyi Polo is the combined glacial force that generates all stars and entire cosmos, the earth as well as the humanity (<http://bhaskarpegu.blogspot.in>). In Donyi Polo faith fountain god associated with cosmos is referred to as Sedi by the Minyong and Padam tribes, while the term Jimi is used by the Galo tribespeople. Among the Apatani Ui is the supreme deity of creation. In Galo beliefs, Melo (Sky) and Sidi (Earth) intermingled and thus gave birth to all things and beings, including Donyi and Polo. Donyi-Polo followers, as the author observed in Apatani villages, perform rituals that coincide with lunar phases and agricultural cycles. The shamanic priests explain the oneness of all living creatures. They recite the origin myths of all Tani tribes and convey that soul resides within all men, plants, animals, and the land that nourishes them, thus establishing a strong harmony between nature and humans. All rituals involve rice beer oblation to sun and moon deities.

This author is of view that the Donyi Polo religion can be located in a continuum, stretched between indigenous faith at minimal level and reformed Donyi Polo faith situated at maximal intertribal level. At one end we notice individual tribes pursuing their own ritual performances and local festivals by involving tribal priests/shamans. At the same time all component tribes follow the reformed mode of worship by uttering Donyi Polo hymns following Angun Bédang (revered book) in the Donyi Polo temples located in all villages. At the same time all past rituals associated with local agricultural operations invoking local deities are strictly followed under the guidance of the local shamans. The term Ui is a common term which Apatani use to refer to god and creator as also to numerous benevolent and malevolent 'spirits' and even ancestors. Radhe Yampi (Yampi, 2012:26) writes that the “concept of god is embedded and is reflected in notions of Danyi Polo (supreme power sun and moon) and Pinii (creator) among the Apatanis. The term Ui includes sun, moon, creator god and many other gods who are all appeased through rituals for ensuring good harvest and prosperity. Tado (2008) writes that Tanii Popih is the religion of the Apatani. Among Apatani the gods and goddesses are divided

into three groups such as Pini siyo (and Yarnii Gornii), as Myorii Sii and Nili Kirii. These various deities are Ui. They are associated with homestead, agricultural fields, bamboo and pine groves, streams, rivers, forest, hills and mountains. These deities are meticulously worshiped by Apatani priests, uttering hymns in priestly language not known to villagers. The primeval Apatani religion is definable also by traits of witchcraft and magical rites associated with ordeal to gain certain objectives. This feature has declined after the reformist transformation. Radhe Yampi who has done a Ph.D. on the theme of Donyi Polo religion among the Apatanis, has noted elements of syncretism in Apatani religion and culture. She has at length referred to characterization of religious syncretism elucidated by Das (2003) and she has titled her book as 'Religion and Syncretism in Apatani Society' (Yampi, 2012).

The author had conducted fieldworks in Apatani villages during the years 2009-10 and observed indigenous knowledge, related to agriculture, various traits of indigenous faith and festivals. Video camera man accompanying our ASI team had filmed the rituals and hymn recitals by shaman-priests running into hours. During 2009 the author had conceptualized, scripted and directed an ethnographic film titled "The Apatani – Sacred Landscape and Indigenous Agriculture in Eastern Himalaya", which was submitted on behalf of Indian Government to UNESCO for proclamation as 'Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity' (2009). The film captures many facets of Apatani agriculture rituals and performance of shaman priest Nyibu during various agricultural festivals. The author had participated in the nature worship after Myoko festival in Ziro village. At the end of Myoko, Murung and Subu festivals the villagers visit the agriculture fields and nearby forest and specially the pine or bamboo groves to offer special veneration. It is believed that deities of the nature (located in landscape, agriculture fields, groves and water channels) must be appeased through offering of rice, eat and millet beer. Also venerated are the village outskirts and 'deities' of distant forests called Myorii Sii. Myorii Sii is indeed the nature deity of the Apatani. Big trees located even outside the 'sacred groves' are never cut. Bath calls this belief system as 'naturalism' among the Apatani (Bath, 2004).

Nyibu, the shaman-priest of Apatani is the custodian of Apatani mythology and Miji, the sacred folklore. Nyibu performs several important rituals and recites the folk legend on special occasions, yet he is neither a shaman nor priest in strict sense. The shamanic Ui-Inii Nyibus performed their rites in secrecy. Like Apatani, the Mishings are followers of Donyi Polism. Their officiating priest is known as the Mibu who is believed to possess supernatural powers to communicate with supernatural beings (http://www.liquisearch.com/what_is_donyi). Through their prolonged contact with the Hindu communities the Mishings have adopted some elements of Hinduism and blended them within Donyi Polism. Such blending of Hindu divinity and tribal beliefs and practices, observable intensely among tribes such as Kachari and Karbis as well, seem to have been possible because many nature-related ethical and ritual practices of Hinduism are complimentary and they match with tribal belief of sacred ecosystem (Das, 2003a, 2003b).

It is demonstrated above that multiple forms of harmonious human-nature relationships as reflected in worldview, ritual, folklore and environmental ethics pursued by the people of north-east India, particularly in the upland regions. Indigenous belief systems and tribal religions of the region encountered major religions in different historical phases, partially as royal initiative and largely through colonial era patronage of foreign missionaries. The cultural pasts of Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh are different from hills of northeast, where colonial era Christian missionary activities had led to precise cultural and religious transformation, leading to crumbling of tribal religious convictions, including decline of sacred human-nature linkages and nature based rituals. People in general are nevertheless too conscious to retain multiple indigenous belief and knowledge systems, including cultural traits embedded in human-nature ties supported by a rich tradition of environmental ethics. Special constitutional provisions and restrictions imposed in NEFA (Arunachal) had allowed these regions to retain the primal ecological-spiritual milieu. Forest remains a crucial source of economic sustenance as also a sacred space, where the shaman-priests periodically invoke the deities of the cosmos and appeal them to keep a

balanced harmony between earth, universe, and the biosphere. Harmony between the cosmos, humankind, and divinity among the people is also reflected in numerous folktales, myths, rituals and 'priestly' hymns.

Tribal cosmologies as this article elucidated include multiple human experiences expressed in larger cultural, spiritual, and ecological spheres. Nature worship is not a mere reflection of spiritualism but a way to reduce harmful environmental impacts. It is argued that "with the present accelerating social, economic, political, cultural and environmental changes due to globalization these cosmologies and the indigenous modes of life are increasingly endangered worldwide. Among the world's indigenous peoples there are thousands of languages and equal or more numbers of cosmologies, and many indigenous cultures, languages and cosmologies are greatly threatened by extermination by dominant and majoritarian cultures and languages, if present trends are not deterred (<http://timeo-habla.blogspot.in/2008/09/cosmology.html>).

TRIBAL RELIGION AND COLONIAL HUMILIATION

In his critique on "Colonialism and Study of Religio", David Chidester (2000a) not only offers a brief sketch of the way in which European colonizers since the 16th century invented and used the category of 'religion' to humiliate, exploit and subjugate indigenous peoples, but also shows how the 19th century academic study of religion was complicit in this dehumanising project. From the 16th century onwards, European observers denied the existence of religion amongst indigenous 'savages', maintaining that their 'superstitions' contained nothing that was similar to the true religion of Christianity (Chidester, 2000a:428). The academic study of religion by means of this classification served European empires in justifying their conquests as a so-called civilising mission.

One Naga scholar has argued that 'clever circulation of the falsehood (in colonial era) that the Nagas did not have a 'religion', 'led to intense proselytization'. As a result, once an alien religion, Christianity now dominates Naga culture. Christianity has in fact become the culture of the people and 'one

who does not profess to be Christian is now considered a "second class" citizen (Thong, 2011). Nagas in general concede that their cultural traditions and ethical values have drastically perished, especially under the influences of Christianity. Naga intellectuals have been sharply vocal in their retrospection. A Naga anthropologist Abraham Lotha said that "In all their enthusiasm to make the Nagas Christians, the missionaries vehemently buried alive the Naga culture. Christianity in Nagaland is transplanted from America and Europe. Christianity is not nourished by Naga life experiences; it has not grown in Naga cultural soil" (Lotha, 2013:77). Lotha has rightly argued that the Christianity has to be integrated into the worldview, social-economic structure, cognitive and linguistic processes of the Naga society (Lotha, 2013:80).

CONCLUSION

We notice a resurgence of indigenous assertiveness at global level, articulated through global networks and indigenous voices raised against dominant regimes. These resistances are especially concerned with the retrieval and renewal of tribal heritage including tribal/indigenous religion. From India, Ram Dayal Munda had represented the indigenous cause of tribes of India in global forums consistently. His contribution 'Adi Dharam', a small book, defines the essence of Adivasi spirituality in true sense. There is no doubt that the notion of 'indigenous religion' has emerged as a vibrant narrative in the globalizing discourse. A growing body of anthropological scholarship is currently trying to make sense of these developments, mainly of the resurgences of indigenous societies in an increasingly interconnected world (Alia, 2010; Cadena and Starn, 2007; Graham and Penny, 2014; Niezen, 2009, 2003).

Clifford has specially highlighted the emergence of "a new public persona and globalizing voice [...]: a présence indigène", operating on multiple scales (local, national, and transnational), and including projects such as language renewal, protection of sacred sites, national agendas and symbols and transnational activism (Clifford, 2013:15). Indigènitè, Clifford claims, "is sustained through media-disseminated images, including a shared symbolic repertoire ('the sacred', 'Mother Earth', 'shamanism', 'sovereignty', the

wisdom of ‘elders’, stewardship of ‘the land’” (Clifford, 2013:16). Ronald Niezen refers to “Indigenous religion” as a new and “global form of religiosity - - - associated with those defined in international law as “indigenous peoples” (Niezen, 2012:131). Niezen’s main concern is the development of a global indigenous identity. Indigenous religion is connected to these grounds, “as a conceptual and performative secondary elaboration of the indigenous people’s concept” (Niezen, 2012: 119-134).

In this critique a discussion is provided to understand the past trend of religion study within anthropology. At the same time it has highlighted the current thinking surrounding indigenous spirituality which is critically related to global concerns of environmentalism and preservation of indigenous cultures. Ultimately what is revealed is that the anthropologists continue to stress the holistic context that grounds the traditional environmental knowledge evident in the cosmologies of indigenous peoples, and is reflected in indigenous expressions such as harmony with nature, healing and holism, antiquity and spirituality, shamanism and animism. In order to substantiate the argument, a few ethnographic examples, drawn mostly from north-east India, are presented to illuminate the spheres of human-nature relationship and environmental ethics as reflected in worldview, nature worship, ritual, folklore and cosmological myths which are all entrenched in tribal religions of north-east India².

NOTES

1. In anthropology the term indigenous refers to small-scale ‘tribal’ societies. Even though often debatable, tribes in different countries are known as “First Nations (Canada), Adivasi (India), Orang Asli (Malaysia), Igorot (Philippines) and Indians/ Native Americans (the Americas). Unfortunately these native societies are often marginalized within the larger cultures; their existence is also threatened by the exploitation of corporations and extractive industries” (Grim, 2005).
2. This review-article is based on published materials of author and other scholars. Fieldworks conducted in northeast India were sponsored by the Anthropological survey of India, over several decades. Author expresses his thankfulness to the ASI. Views expressed are those of author alone.

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