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The Bonpa Indigenous Cure System of Sowa Rigpa or 'Science of Healing' Practices: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract---The Tibetan medicinal system is among the oldest known healing traditions practiced in the world. History is witness to the fact that there is a vast treasure trove of indigenous knowledge and practices. It offers a holistic treatment system that is aimed at regulating and maintaining an astute balance of the functional principles defining human existence through mind and body. Indigenous medicine is an integral part of the Tibetan culture and has grown and developed across several centuries and geographical spaces. The origins of Tibetan system that pertain to the Bon religious tenets are apparently very old as aspects of the Tibetan medicine have been traced to ancient cultures over 2,500 years old. Traditionally the Tibetan curative system has been known as Sowa-Rigpa Medicine meaning the 'Science of Healing'. "It is a centuries old system of treatment that is based on a complex approach to diagnosis, incorporating techniques like taking the pulse and conducting an analysis of bodily fluids besides making an examination of the behavior and dietary intake. The medicines are composed of natural materials (e.g., herbs, minerals, plants, leaves etc) and physical therapies (e.g. Tibetan acupuncture, moxabustion, etc) to treat illness.

Keywords---acupuncture, empirical research tools, healing traditions, moxibustion, therapies.

Introduction

The concept of 'One Health' or an integrated approach to healing has been encrypted in the cultures of civilizations since ages. The indigenous medicinal systems of the world have encapsulated the surroundings of the human habitat encompassing its physical as well as psycho-spiritual influences. This paper is an exploratory study of the lesser known Bonpa system of healing which has been for long clubbed under a broad umbrella of Tibetan Medicine (Smith et al., 2018; Chuyko et al., 2021).

The Tibetan medicinal system is among the oldest known healing traditions practiced in the world. History is witness to the fact that there is a vast treasure trove of indigenous knowledge and practices. It offers a holistic treatment system that is aimed at regulating and maintaining an astute balance of the functional principles defining human existence through mind and body. Indigenous medicine is an integral part of the Tibetan culture and has grown and developed across several centuries and geographical spaces. The origins of Tibetan system that pertain to the Bon religious tenets are apparently very old as aspects of the Tibetan medicine have been traced to ancient cultures over 2,500 years old. Records show that the kingdom of Zhang Zhung had the practitioners of the Bon Shamanistic religion supporting the texts describing healing rituals, medicinal divination and astrology besides natural herbal remedies that were advocated for specific elemental disturbances. According to Ember & Ember (2003), in their "Health and Illness in the World's Culture's describe how, these traditional healers specialize in overlapping arenas of knowledge rather than comprising a homogenous set of practices and theories" (Hruschka, 1998; Humphrey & Onon, 1996). "The therapies include massage and musculoskeletal manipulation to treat maladies like concussions, broken bones, headaches and bone or organ displacements" (Hruschka, 1998). "Some of the traditional healers employee ecstatic trance to master spirits with power over maladies and misfortunes" (Humphrey & Onon, 1996). "Some of them specialize in female fertility and child development" (Humphrey & Onon, 1996). Each specialist is believed to possess the power of spirits and forces related to his or her field of knowledge (Udu et al., 2016; Al-Sofi & Abouabdulqader, 2020).

Traditionally the Tibetan curative system has been known as Sowa-Rigpa Medicine meaning the 'Science of Healing'. "It is a centuries old system of treatment that is based on a complex approach to diagnosis, incorporating techniques like taking the pulse and conducting an analysis of bodily fluids besides making an examination of the behavior and dietary intake. The medicines are composed of natural materials (e.g., herbs, minerals, plants, leaves etc) and physical therapies (e.g. Tibetan acupuncture, moxabustion, etc) to treat illness. The processes of making these medicines form an articulate, highly specialized teaching module worthy of the best medicinal practitioners in the world".

Some of the cures that have been used commonly are like applying residual barley from Chang (Tibetan wine) on swollen body parts, drinking hot water for indigestion or using melted butter for bleeding. There are homilies that have transcended medicinal therapies and form the sum total of practical experiences which gradually formed the basis for the 'Science of healing or Sowa Rigpa

practiced traditionally by the Bonpa or Teachers of the Bon religion that incorporates within itself the basic elements of shamanism and the tenets of Buddhism. The Tibetan medicinal heritage has been detailed in the Book of the Four Tantras (rGyud-bZhi), which explains how medicinal diagnostic logic is applied to suffering and remains the fundamental medicinal text having wide applicability even today (Levin, 2008; Quah, 2003).

The Bon tradition flourished in Tibet prior to the advent of Buddhism. "The Bon curative practice has influenced and enriched the Tibetan Medicinal knowledge and practice over the centuries." It has been mentioned in a Bon text titled "Jamma tsa-drel" (translation not available) that around 200 B.C., (during the emergence of the first Tibetan King Nyatri Tsenpo) "there lived twelve scholars of the Bon tradition including a medicinal scholar who treated diseases through medication and therapy. This showed that the Tibetans practiced medicine and that there were Tibetan physicians prior to the advent of Buddhism in Tibet".

Research Methodology

The fieldwork for the present study was conducted using empirical research tools of enquiry prepared for qualitative approach to data collection in and around Menri Monastery, located at Dolanji village in the Sirmaur district of Solan, Himachal Pradesh, India. The Universe of study included the Redna Menling Nunnery, located on the opposite side of the valley of Dolanji. It is the first ever Yungdrung Bon Nunnery built outside Tibet. The monks, nuns, lamas, people working in the monasteries, people living in and around the monastery make up the universe of this study. However the sample size is small but provided ample qualitative inputs for the paper. Other than the above mentioned methods, Photography as well as Voice recording technique was also used in order during the in-depth interviews which were later transcribed in detail to obtain the valuable content (Han, 2004; Streitberger & Kleinhenz, 1998).

The fundamentals of bon medicinal system

This system of medicine and cure is currently being practiced in "Tibet, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Ladakh, Siberia, China and Mongolia and more recently in parts of Europe and North America as well." It propagates the traditional Buddhist belief that all illnesses result from the three poisons:

- Greed: Undue attachment and lust for anything that impacts upon the desires, people, objects and behavior.
- Anger: Uncontrolled emotion of hostility, irritation, aversion and aggression.
- Delusion: Being in a state of confusion, ignorance and narrow mindedness.

The underlying philosophy of the Tibetan medicinal system is that the purpose of life is to be happy. The Tibetan medicinal system allows one to become aware of the manner in which thoughts and behavior influencing health and overall wellbeing of an individual and even an entire community. This form of Tibetan medicine is different from other conventional systems of cure because it emphasizes on finding and treating imbalances as the first step towards healing and health. Disease or the extreme imbalance can be manifested through the

constitution and temperament wherever contacted much before any physical symptoms begin to appear. "The entire focus of the practitioner of this medicinal system is on treating illness by correcting the underlying imbalances. The treating of any disease is not merely curing a symptom or reacting to a single abnormality. In fact each symptom and sign of dysfunction throws light on the overall pattern of imbalance. The underlying principle is that the healing of negative thinking and making healthy lifestyle choices can restore the balance within the body and the mind. It is also an accepted fact that overall physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing is a lifelong process of living in harmony with nature and all elements of the environment. Tibetan medicine systems are founded in the belief that all living beings are made up of energy. Everyone is born with a unique nature or constitution consisting of three primary energies" (In the Ayurvedic medicinal system these are known as *Vata*, *Pitta* and *Kapha* respectively).

- *rLung* is the movement energy.
- *Mkhris-pa* is hot energy.
- Badkan is cold energy.

The Tibetan word 'Nyepa' refers to these energies that are essential for life. A unique combination of these three primary energies, refers to one's constitutional nature or constitution. "Tibetan medicine is the art and science of keeping primary energies in balance with the constitution to promote health and happiness" (Park, et al., 2010; Yi, 2009).

The fundamental principles of Tibetan medicine

Tibetan medicinal practices rest on the understanding of certain rudimentary factors which are:

- Karma: "It refers to the universal law of cause and effect. The behavior of an individual can have a positive or negative effect on oneself, others and also the environment. Sometimes choices have an immediate and obvious effect and sometimes the effects are not so obvious at first but tend to appear or affect the individual much later in a circuitous manner that enunciates the cause and effect manifestation".
 - According to an example "choosing to eat a cereal with sugar for breakfast would bring about the immediate effect of pleasure from satisfaction of hunger and the cravings for something sweet. The delayed consequence of these acts in the form of sluggishness and decreased metabolism in the afternoon." Tibetan medicine teaches the importance of being aware of both the immediate and long-term consequences of one's choices so that one learns to choose what promotes health and happiness.
- Suffering
 - "Suffering can be physical, mental, spiritual and emotional. It is a universal condition of human life. In fact, the human life is spent trying to avoid suffering and to relieve suffering in one or other way. Suffering may not be described in terms of physical pain. Tibetan medicine teaches that suffering results from interpreting life in any negative form".

- Healing
 - According to the Tibetan medicine system, "healing results from creating a healthy mind and making healthy lifestyle choices that recharge the primary energies and retail the inborn constitutional balance".
- Happiness

The medicinal system underlines that "true happiness means lasting peace and is a product of integrity and an overall feeling of wellbeing that results from positive thinking and leading a balanced lifestyle".

Five universal elements governing health in the bon curative system

The three primary energies are dependent upon five universal characteristics or elements in terms of which all physiological functions work with synergy to maintain physical and mental health (Cameron, 2020). These five elements are:

- Earth elements pertaining to that "aspect of energy that provides stability and structure. Sitting, walking, lying down are all functions of this element".
- Water comprises that "aspect of energy that provides moisture, lubrication and smoothness. Blood is considered a water element".
- Fire contributes to the aspect of energy that "drives growth, development, metabolism and absorption of food. Digestion is carried out by virtue of this element".
- Air refers to "the aspect of the energy that governs movement in the body including blood circulation and growth of skin. Breathing is a function of this element. The heart pumps blood as also all body movements are caused by air element."
- Space is a manifestation of the aspect of energy that "allows other elements to interact and co-exist. It is projects that the space within the mouth provides room for the teeth and the tongue to help in chewing and speaking."

The specifics of the five elements as pertaining to the energies are depicted in Table 1.

Table 1 Primary energies and elements

Sr. No.	Tibetan Term	Primary Energy	Composed Of The Element
1	RLung	Movement	Air
2	Mkhris-pa	Heat	Fire
3	Badkan	Cold	Earth, Water

Source: Compiled by authors

As all the energies are combined to create a vital balance it is observed that when one energy goes out of balance, the other energies are also most likely to go out of balance as well. Imbalance in the primary energies develops disturbances in the entire constitution of the individual than can be visualized in various kinds of ill-health conditions.

Sr.

No.

2

3

Imbalance caused In	Mental Poison	Health Pro	blems due to	Imbalance
Primary Energy				
RLung	Greed, Attachment,	"Anxiety,	movement	disorders,
	Desire	insomnia,	mental	illness,
		addictions"		
Mkhris-pa	Anger, Hostility,	"Inflammat	ions,	infections,
	Aggression	metabolic and hormonal problems"		

"Respiratory

diabetes"

disorders,

obesity,

Table 2 Causatives of imbalances in the primary energies

Delusion, Confusion,

Close – mindedness

Source: Compiled by authors

Badkan

The tantric route to cure

Four Tantras (*rGyud-bZhi*) is a complete and profound multi-faceted fundamental text of Tibetan medicine, encompassing its unabridged theories and practices. It is considered the basis of Tibetan medicinal practice even today and is the evolved form of practice, invention and development contributed by eminent scholars of Tibet. The legendary Yuthok Yonten Gonpo, father of Tibetan Medicine, had composed *rGyud-bZhi* by incorporating the essence of the known Asian medicinal systems including Ayurveda, Chinese and Greek systems of medicine; making it one of the oldest, most comprehensive and reliable curative systems of the world (Kawalek, 2020; Benbasat & Nault, 1990).

Four Tantras has been understood to be a common name given to the text of 'Secret Tantra Instructions' on the 'Eight Branches' and the 'Immorality Elixir' essence. The complete text encompasses 5900 verses grouped into 156 chapters. The focus of the Four Tantras are:

- The Root Tantra (*TsaGyue*)
 - "It is the first section, which comprises six chapters that give a brief outline of the entire text while comparing the medicinal system with a tree. These roots sprout into nine stems, and branch out into 47 branches bearing 224 leaves. The nine stems represent the nine sections of medicinal science, the branches stand for general information and the leaves illustrate the details".
- The Explanatory Tantra (*Shed Gyue*)

 "The second Tantra is the Explanatory Tantra which encompasses 31 chapters and is concerned with the life cycle (conception, childbirth, functioning of the three humours and signs of death), causes, conditions and classification of the diseases. It specifies the properties of medicinal ingredients and explains in detail, the diet, behavior and rules for maintaining health etc. It also contains a code of conduct for the physician".
- The Oral Tradition Tantra for Instruction (*Man Ngaggyue*) "The third Tantra, consists of 92 chapters which teach about the 101 disorders of the three humours indicating their causes, conditions, symptoms and methods of therapy".

• The Last Tantra (ChimaGyue)

"The fourth Tantra, is comprised of 27 chapters, which deal with diagnosis (such as urine analysis and pulse reading), pacifying medicinal ingredients and their preparations (pills, powders, syrups, medicinal butters, etc) evacuative medications (purgatives and emetics) and additional treatments (moxibustion, golden-needle therapy) which are applied when all other medicinal preparations have failed to effect a cure".

The Tibetan medicine's three methods of diagnosis

"The Tibetan approach to cure is a more spiritual and natural approach to medicine as compared to western medicine. The diagnosis of the disease is mainly conducted through visual, touch (pulse) and interrogation".

- Visual Examination: "The Visual examination involves a study of the five sensory organs, stool and urine." A general visual diagnosis includes a comprehensive complexion of the skin, texture of the blood and other body fluids and excreta like sputum, urine and stool.
- Touch and Palpation: "Touch involves examination of the body organs, energy meridians and pulse of the patients by feeling them with a sensitive touch." Prolonged study of the pulse was a sure method of diagnosis of several conditions of ill-health.
- Interrogation and Personal Query: Interrogation has been seen to be an
 intense form and by far the most useful method in diagnosis. The main
 purpose of this form of query was to locate the causative factor, the site of
 illness and the signs and symptoms it had manifested. Several questions
 are asked from the patients for clinical assessment and correct diagnosis of
 diseases.

Courses of treatment practiced by the Tibetan bon pa

Basically there are three different approaches for treating diseases in the Tibetan medicinal system. These have been detailed as follows:

- Dietary Approach: According to the Tibetan medicinal system, there is no substance on this earth that does not possess any medicinal property. However, it is necessary to be aware of it and know its taste and potency, ways and means to collect it and the manner in which it is to be processed as also to determine the raw materials for obtaining the optimal therapeutic value. There are six principles of tastes sweet, bitter, astringent, sour, hot and salty. Over all the digestion is aided by the six tastes which are present in the food that we ingest. Earth as a basis, water to moisten, fire to ripen, air to cause movement and space to provide for growth are basic essentials (Choedon & Kumar, 2012). Where all five elements are present, it is the predominance of two of the five elements that determines the taste.
 - Earth and water generate sweet taste
 - Fire and earth result in sour taste
 - Water and fire produce salty taste
 - Water and air form a bitter taste

- Fire and air generate hot or spicy taste
- Earth and air produce an astringent taste. All these tastes have different influences on the body.
- Behavioural Approach: Physical, emotional as well as mental behavior patterns that are practiced in an inadequate, excessive or distorted manner can create the conditions for manifestations resulting in states of ill-health. The behavioural approach focuses on routine, seasonal and incidental behaviours. Every negative action results in negative consequences. Routine behavior generally deals with the proper usage of body, mind and speech. Every individual has a unique distribution of the bodily energies and elements. Energy transformation takes place in the body with respect to changes in the environment and is used in the attempt to harmonize behavior in accordance with change. The behavior that prescribes the avoidance or obstruction of the impulse for hunger, thirst, vomiting, sneezing, expelling of mucus, saliva, stool, gas, urine and semen should be avoided as at these singly or in combination are causative of humoral imbalances. If these fluids are suppressed or expelled forcefully, a variety of disorders could rise with the immediate disruption of rlung energy.
- External Approach: When the diet and routine behavior are unable to relieve the disease conditions then herbal medicines are prescribed. This includes oil therapy, moxibustion therapy and herbal, nature based Tibetan medicines.



Figure 1. Shot taken in between the medicine making process

The various therapies commonly put into use in the Tibetan system of medicine are:

• Oil Therapy: "Many diseases of the nerves and muscles, as well as pain and insomnia (related to *rLung*), are treated with gentle massage using various medicinal oils. Tibetan therapeutic massage is one of the external therapies found in four tantras (*rgyud-bzhi*) for treatment of wind (*rLung*) imbalances and stress related disorders. Medicinal bath and natural spring baths are used for the treatment of assorted skin disorders as well as chronic arthritis, gout and cold affected rheumatism besides rigid and stiff

extremities." The Sorig therapeutic massage oil (JukNuum Agar Dhetar) has been known to be therapeutic and has infusions of Helianthus annus, Sesamum indicum, Zingiber officinale, Tinospora cordifola, Rubus sp., Bombax ceiba, Ammomumsubulatum, Myristicafragrans, Carum carvi, Curcuma longa, Adatodavasicanees, Sweiachirata, Elletaria cardamomum, Carthamus tinctorius and Syzygiumaromaticum.

- Moxibustion Therapy: Herb cones of mugwort (*Artemesia*) are burned directly in the skin at certain reflex points or indirectly through a golden needle. Energy is supplied to these specially selected reflex points. In addition, many practitioners use the golden needle to stimulate the energy channels of the body. This external therapy is mainly used in the anterior fontanelle area of the head. Low blood pressure, dizziness, dullness of sensory organs, imbalances related to wind (*rLung*) and phlegm (*badkan*) are treated under this therapy. Moxibustion can be performed on all the points known to acupuncture and can be used for most cold diseases. The list of indications for them include rLung and Badkan imbalances. This therapeutic form helps increase blood circulation, enhances energy and boosts the immune system.
- Spiritual Healing: Bon religion is the shamanistic religion that considers every being to be some kind of spirit, either good or bad. There are many diseases that are caused by the spirit world or specific spirits. This calls for some form of spiritual healing. Bon has been known for its traditional methods of spiritual healing to complement the natural medicinal treatments.

There are various kinds of mantras combined with different rituals that help in curing the diseases brought on by the spirits. These diseases have one thing in common they are not curable by medicines and no matter how much one may try or how qualified or experienced the western doctors one may consult it would take a specialist like the Bon pa to understand the depth of the ill-health condition and the required curative therapy. This form of ill-health entails seeing Lama who makes a *mo* (divination) to uncover the root or origin of the problem. The Lama prescribes some rituals. Once the rituals have been performed and the spirits exorcised, the patient is put on a medicinal treatment regime. The medicine is useful only after the malevolent spirit has been exorcised.



Figure 2. Containers of natural herbs, minerals for Tibetan bon medicines

Interpersonal exchange with tibetan medicine practitioner

Sorig Bumzhi, teacher at the medicinal college, Yungdrung Tashi said that for curing diseases caused by evil spirits, "a combination of mantra, medicine along with a specific ceremony (Pooja) by a dedicated Lama is required". When asked about any Mantra that could be helpful in these cases, he said "Mantras are confidential and even the patient is supposed to only whisper them". He also explained about the "la" which refers to vital energy. In the world where spirits exist it is known as the "Don", which can steal the la from a very weak person. This leads to worsening of the state of ill-health. If the la is not recovered the patient dies. There are some special poojas (ceremonies) performed by the Lamas to recover the la.

• Astrological Estimations: The Bonpo also learn and practice astrology for curing conditions of ill-health. When asked to comment on this, the Lama said "We refer to the astrology of the human being before beginning the treatment and if it shows that the person will live then only do we begin the treatment otherwise we don't".

Natural wealth of herbal cures

The Bonpo medicinal system has a wealth of traditional herbal remedies. The natural curative system consists of multi-component formulations comprising natural herbs and minerals collected from mountains and various vegetation zones. There are over 250 medicinal formulations that can have as less as three to a maximum of 150 herbs per formula. The dosages tend to vary from individual to individual and according to the Lama, teacher of medicine, "these medicines do not have any side-effects as they are pure natural herbs and do not have any harmful chemicals" (Engebretson, 2002; Wampold et al., 2002).

A commonly used plant is *Termanlia chebula* which is considered to be the king of all herbal concoctions. It possesses all the six tastes and can cure numerous physical disorders. *Rhodiola*, due to its cold nature is used to treat fever causing diseases like Tuberculosis. The use of Tibetan medicine against chronic diseases like cancer has highlighted its improved efficacy and the benefit of negligible or reduced side effects. Tibetan medicines is always seen in the context of contemporary alternative medicine and thus, could prove to be an effective supporting therapy to the conventional medicinal system (Schlieter, 2016; Tokar & Khangkar, 1998; Di Sarsina et al., 2011).

Table 3
Common diseases and their Tibetan medicine names

S. No.	Disease	Medicine (In Tibetan)	
1.	Fever, Cold and Cough	NarbuDhun Thang	
2.	Piles	JiThang Dhunpa	
3.	Weakness	Sum Menmer	
4.	Indigestion	Shije Dhugpa	
5.	Skin Disease	Sablag	

Source: Compiled by authors

Some herbal based medicines for common diseases have been listed in Table-3. They had been enumerated as reported by a medicinal student of the Sorig Bumzhi Medicinal College at Menri Ling in the Menri Monastery (Tanwete & Kombinda, 2020; Suryasa et al., 2019).

Conclusion

The Traditional medicinal system of the Bon religion is also known as Sowa-Rigpa. It works on the principle that the imbalance of the five elements in the body of sentient beings leads to various kinds of diseases. The system includes techniques such as pulse analysis and the course of treatment is through urine analysis and medicines made by natural herbs, minerals etc. Four tantras is a traditional and fundamental text including all the techniques and theories of Tibetan medicine. This medicinal system does not only include healing through these techniques but the diseases that are believed to have been caused due to spirits are also healed by ceremonies that include reciting confidential mantras and unique rituals. Astrology also play an important role in the healing of the diseases by the Lamas. There are homilies that have transcended medicinal therapies and form the sum total of practical experiences which gradually formed the basis for the 'Science of healing or Sowa Rigpa practiced traditionally by the Bonpa or Teachers of the Bon religion that incorporates within itself the basic elements of shamanism and the tenets of Buddhism. There is scope for further research in this field. It is hoped that future scholars will examine the depth and expanse of the Tibetan curative system and its applicability to the current pandemic riddled world. This paper is an attempt to provoke further inquiry into the subject.

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