

Social Change, Religion and Medicine among Brokpas of Ladakh

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ABSTRACT The present study focuses on relationship between religion and medicine in context of social change among Brokpa, a distinctive cultural ethnic community nestled in central Ladakh on an offbeat track. The Brokpas of Dah-Bema are the one of the last remnants of an ancient and unique culture known generally under the 'Dards'. For Brok-pa ethnicity is the only form of defining status. The socio-religious belief system of Brokpa has its basis in the concept of pollution. In the Brokpa villages, strangers were and are not welcome. Brokpa practice two contradictory religions side by side-traditional 'Minaro' religion (spirit worship) as well as Lamaism. Their religious beliefs and rituals were originally in essence demonolatry, ancestor worship and nature worship. With the passage of time, these religious beliefs have absorbed Buddhist ritual and practices as well. Brokpa's rites of exorcism are the use of prayers, fumigations (burning of juniper) and animal sacrifice. Brokpa place great emphasis on coercive rites of exorcising and destroying demons. Brokpa worship nature-mountains, flowers, water spirits, earth spirit and ibex horns a natural out come of their ecological conditions. According to Brokpa traditions, shepherds who come down from pasture grounds are permeating with purity. Traditions prohibit women from coming close to the Juniper shrine (*Chillgi Deuha*) at *Dah-Drouk* (pasture ground). One can best comprehend the Brokpa medicine largely in terms of cultural belief and definition in their environmental setting. The Brokpa village under study juxtaposed between two cultural, social and religious systems. Cultural values and context play a greater role in conceptual frameworks to understand health and illness perceptions. In Brokpa culture, the cause and effect of illness for all time rests on religious beliefs. Four systems of treatment are available to them: herbal; ritual care; biomedicine and *amchi* medicine beside home remedies. Brokpa admit personal use of herbs, spiritual cure and preventive measures. They integrate herbs, especially *Chillgi* (Juniper) into religious belief pattern and spiritual cleaning. The Juniper (*Chillgi*) tree holds a special significance for Brokpa, as it cleans the atmosphere of evil spirits. Brokpa make use of juniper in their religious ceremonies as anti-pollutant. In Dah, local discourse on causes on sickness is changing along with changing environmental and social conditions. The diseases not related to local environment are not treatable by local methods. Dah provides a striking example of a culture and society, which subjected to strong outside influences. The pressure of these outside influences has caused increase in their ceremonies of traditional folk religion as it provide a coping mechanism for Brokpa to deal with rapid changes that have occurred during recent decades. In Dah, the medical power, in the past transformed in to social power because of the *Lha-bab*'s monopoly on therapeutic care and the people's dependency on them. Local accounts of health and sickness among Brokpa suggest that the explanations of ill health are undergoing subtle redefinition as they draw comparisons between past and present conditions. It is interesting to note that Brokpa of Dah, while remained within the traditional framework through dependency on each other, and through fear of supernaturals, yet in Dah, pragmatism proves stronger than belief, at least in the matter of health care. For health care, they mostly depend on biomedicine along with their precautionary rituals and taboos. However, in the past *lha-bab* were more important than *amchi*, because they specialised in centric modes of healing. The social relations of healing embedded in the local setting. The priestly officials- *Lha-bdag*, *brongopa* and *lha-bab* play an important role in being a means and channel to express and deal with social suffering involved in the Brokpa's loss of fear of loosing identity, ethnic discrimination and recent changes. Ritual taboos, complex of pollution purity and organised system of ritual prescription regulates the life within the village as well as between and within each household.