

Illness Interpretation and Modes of Treatment in Kirtipur

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Introduction

This paper is based on the field work carried as a part of UNFPA Project in 1983 among the Newars of Kirtipur, Nepal. An attempt is made to explore the interpretation and beliefs about causes of illness as held by the people of study area. The nature of community reactions and management of illness are also the special areas of interest on which the whole subject matter of the paper rests.

Social and Cultural Aspect of Illness Interpretation

The traditional interpretation of illness in Kirtipur goes far beyond exploring the ambiguous causes and their appropriate remedies like many other traditional communities (see Tuckett, 1977:293, Foster 1978:43, Stone 1976:57, Hands 1982:57). The understanding of disease causality stems from a distinctive conceptual organization of Newar culture. Illness for the Newar of Kirtipur is a state in which many natural and supernatural forces partake. Thus, illness and affliction are attributed to deeper and often ambiguous causes. Informants believed that patient's social, moral and ritual situations can be responsible for prevalence of a particular illness. Instead of merely analyzing patient's illness in most cases therefore, a correlation is established among the various forces.

Illness in Kirtipur is not simply a biological and metaphysical phenomenon, it is socio-somatic in nature (Renee 1973:9). People always present logico-rational explanations of illness, and curing techniques are organized accordingly within the broader Newar cultural perspective and social organization.

The Kirtipur people hold the belief that agents responsible for various diseases are widespread in their area. It is, therefore, usual that individuals easily come into their influence. When an individual falls ill, his behaviour under the influence of illness is observed by his relatives. They then decided whom to consult amongst several medical practitioners available in the village. Some times experienced people recommend means to control the situation. Invariably, it is the job of traditional medical practitioners² who always possess better knowledge and skills to cure the illness. The people of Kirtipur believe that various types of illness are caused by several natural and

supernatural forces and the traditional medical practitioners are the only people who can trace out the disease causation levels and control the situation. For the local people, these illnesses are distinct from each other because the forces or agents responsible for all of them are thought to be playing different roles. As King (1962:91) correctly writes on the theory of illness.

Beliefs and attitudes toward disease in any group will be held with tenacity and assurance that they are quite adequate to explain and handle illness. People believe that the malefic action of another human being or intervention by a supernatural power cause disease, which can be cured only by resort to appropriate magical formula or application to the supernatural power.

Natural and Supernatural Causes of Illness

Illness interpretation in Kirtipur can be divided into two broad causation levels — natural and supernatural. The following is a description of supernatural causation of illness. The role of various traditional medical practitioners in handling such supernatural forces is also detailed. This will be followed by a description of natural forces of illness causation.

Supernatural Causes

The people of Kirtipur believe that numerous illnesses are caused by the 'attacks' (lageajwima) of supernatural forces. It is argued that an intervention of such forces while trapped inside human body can cause illnesses.

1. Chwāsa

Chwāsa³ is a square elevated ground located in each Newar ward, at the side of a cross-road. It is a public place assigned in each Newar community as a tole or area specific rather than caste specific.

The Chwāsa is a socially accepted place where people can throw household rubbish. When a person dies, the rice (for the man who sits in the mourning site) is cooked using three mud bricks (kaci apā) instead of the usual mud stove. On the last day of mourning (sudhi), these bricks and other ritual items are thrown at chwāsa. It is also an appropriate place for the clothes and other possessions of a deceased person to be thrown. After the birth of a new born, the blood soaked clothes, umbilical cord and placenta are thrown at the chwāsa by the local midwife (didi-aji).

The people of Kirtipur believe that chwāsa is the abode of two spirits, known by kinship terms — grandfather-grandmother (āju-aji). These two spirits are husband and wife according to a local interpretation. One particular informant claims he has seen the old couple one mid-night. According to him, they wore white clothes and were tall.

Another informant argued that āju-aji change their dress and shape to any form. Some informants consider this couple as deities (deo) and others as evil spirits (bhut). On the day of gatha mungal which occurs in the month of June-July, people of each ward gather at their respective chwāsa and worship āju-aji by burning ricestraw (chwāli).

The local belief is that āju-aji attack human beings only when their 'hunger' is not appeased. When one suspects their attack, the hunger must be satisfied, offering a small share (bhag) to them. While small children are most vulnerable, āju-aji can attack adults too. They may act individually or together depending upon their whim.

The sick suffers from severe stomach pain, headache, bleeding through mouth and diarrhoea. He consults a village exorcist (jhār-phuk-yaimā) or a vaidya who knows tantric spells (mantra). The practitioner observes, reads the pulse and then decides the causation level of the illness following a trial and error method. If the traditional medical practitioner feels that āju-aji are involved, he recommends that the patient put some cooked rice (jā) and five lamps on a green leaf of bauhinia vahilii (ghum). It is to be left at the chwāsa site either in the early morning or after the sunset. If the patient is a child whose feeding ceremony is not yet performed, flattened rice (baji) is offered instead of the cooked rice. The exorcist may recite spells if he thinks the act necessary.

The process of intervention of the chwāsa caused illnesses depends upon the traditional medical practitioners who possess knowledge on the nature of spirits. They are considered indispensable in maintaining a harmonious relationship between the spirits and human beings.

2. Gayo

Gayo is also a public place in Kirtipur. On the last day of mourning rite ceremony, the deceased's relatives are invited to a feast (bhoj). The left over food and garbage of the feast are thrown to the Gayo.

People believe that gayo is the abode of an evil spirit called 'gayo spirit' (gayo-bhut). It is said that, unlike chwāsa which resembles human beings, gayo appears like black ball. Among these spirits, some are more malevolent than others. People claim that if an individual is attacked by the gayo of a particular place called Macadeo, an immediate measure must be taken to ensure the patient's survival.

A person afflicted by the gayo suffers from a sudden and severe stomach pain. A local exorcist must be consulted immediately to relieve the problem. Offerings of flattened rice (baji), ginger (pālu) and salt (ci), must be made to the gayo.

3. Puihayegu

The people of Kirtipur consider water sources (e.g. ponds, wells and natural taps etc.), the abodes of several disease causing agents,

and call such diseases by a generic term Puihayegu. When one suffers from mild stomach ache and high fever, a local vaidya or exorcist is consulted to cure it. The treatment involves putting turmeric coloured rice on a green leaf of bauhinia vahilii (ghum), making serpent god (nag) from raw cotton and vermillion powder (abir), and consecrating them near the suspected water source.

4. Deo-Palagu

A person, who happens to come on the way of god may suffer from the latter's influence. When this happens, the person show symptoms of epilepsy. One can contract this illness anywhere. This disease in Kirtipur is also called topu-waigu. People have to seek the help of a tantric vaidya to cure this illness.

5. Dhopwa

In Newari 'Dhopwa' means outlet of a household or ward sewer. It is the abode of the spirit dhopwa, who is considered responsible for many diseases. It is said that dhopwa looks like a small rooster and crows at night to cause illness among people.

The symptoms of this illness are nausea and diarrhoea (jhārā-bāntā) with mild fever (jor). When a vaidya is consulted, he establishes a ritual friendship (miteri) between the patient and dhopwa. The believe is that such relationship compels the dhopwa to remove his ill influence. Grains of uncooked rice (kanika) are washed in the water and left at the side of the pond or tap.

6. Bhuji Khā Nyāigu

In classical Newari bhuji khā nyāigu means 'bites of young flies.' Rashes (khatira) appear on the particular parts of the patient's body. The patient must rub his body with a net bag (jāli-thaili) and press the latter under stone grinder (lo-macā) which is left at the stairs of four days.

7. Kaladeo

Kaladeo, the spirit, is believed to reside at a place where garbage from the area is deposited. An attack of Kaladeo brings stomach ache and high fever. A vaidya or exorcist is usually consulted to determine the underlying cause of illness (dosa). The remedy recommended for all Kaladeo caused illness is simple: Some flattened rice (baji) is kept on a green ghum leaf and dropped it at the abode of Kaladeo. The local curer may also officiate rituals if the illness requires so.

8. Chetra Pāla

Chetra pāla is considered the god that protects the area and its people. His shrine, located at Ward No. 7 of Chithu Panchayat of Kirtipur, is visited each morning by the women of Chithu ward to offer rice

grains. The god stone Chetra pāla is placed on the ground at the cross-road side of the Chithu Tole. If Chetra pāla becomes unhappy, he brings diarrhoea and fever. An exorcist is consulted to cure such illness. He performs a ritual and offers flattened rice (baji), a piece of ginger (pālu) and grains of salt (ci) to the Chetra pāla.

9. Gasima or Aisamacā

Children between the age of 3 to 6 years are vulnerable to gasima illness. When a mother becomes pregnant her already lactating child sometime does not like to eat and do unnecessary encumbrance. The child never gets sound sleep and exhibits weeping behaviour. This sort of illness is called gasima macā or aisamacā or sometime also a weeping illness (runce rog). When a child suffers from aisa (weeping) or gasima (very lean and thin) his face is washed in the early hours of the morning and is taken to circumambulate the pipal (ficus religiosa) tree. Items like cow's milk (sādudu), ghee (ghya), honey (kasti) and flattened rice (baji) are offered. Clothes of the child (maca la), clay lamps (kuchila), thatch rope - (khasiwipa) are also taken. A small vessel (ghacā) and the cloth of the child are hung on the rope and tied around the trunk of the tree. The first visit is followed by rituals performed in the name of child, but rest five consecutive days' visits do not need any kind of ritual performance.

10. Khāyātamha Deo

The shrine of Khāyātamha deo is located at Bhat Bhateni, Kathmandu. This god is said to be responsible for various illnesses among small children. The term 'khāyātamha' in Newari means 'child taken by an eagle.' The child contacted by khayatamha deo loses his sense, falls on the ground and rolls the eye upside down. When these symptoms appear, a local vaidya is resorted to cure the illness. The vaidya raises consecrated rice (acheta - sanima) and promises to perform a ritual to the khāyātamha deo on a later date (see Stone, 1981:65).

It is believed that the khāyātamha deo must be appeased prior to the use of medicine. If an individual does not heed this either the medicine does not work or the illness gets worse. In the worship of khāyātamha deo people offer rice (jāki), flattened rice (baji), egg (khe), meat (lā), beer (tho), ginger (pālu) and soyabeans (musyā) etc. The single term to denote these ritual items is 'same baji' in local Newari language.

11. Kyakahagu

The kyakahagu illness is caused by the evil spells (kumantira) directed at an individual by human agents or by supernatural forces. It is said that the spell enters on a particular part of body and affects that part. When it is suspected of kyakahagu illness, the sick must consult a local exorcist (jhar-phuk-yāima). The exorcist recites mantra

for three consecutive times. In each visit, the patient's affected part is brushed off three times with a particular grass brush (tuphi).

12. Mikhawangu

The Newars of Kirtipur consider witchcraft (mikhawangu) responsible for several illnesses. When a person suspects of evil eye, he goes to a local exorcist. The practitioner can tell who, where and how the deliberate act of witchcraft (kukartu) was accomplished. He performs anti-spells - (ultamantra) to remove the evil act. When the evil spell is cast through the food items, the exorcist asks the patient to bring food items and consult him either on Tuesday or Saturday. From the tantric viewpoint these two days of the week are considered auspicious. On the chosen day the exorcist recites hymns to extract evil spells from food items and asks the patient to eat them by putting them on the patient's opposite side of the right palm.

Depending on the duration of illness and the effect of evil spell on the patient, the exorcist may continue the treatment from a few days to a few weeks. If the condition does not improve, the practitioner suggests to conduct a worship (puja) in the name of some powerful gods or goddesses.

13. Nakahaigu

When an individual happens to eat food on which a spell is cast by a female witch (boksi mantra), he contacts the nakahaigu illness. The symptoms related to nakahaigu illness are loss of appetite and failing health condition. When these symptoms appear, a tantric vaidya is consulted. When confirmed that it is nakahaigu illness, the patient is asked to bring food on which the witch is suspected to have cast her spell.

The practitioner mixes honey (kasti), clarified butter (ghya), sugar (sakha) and mustard grain flour (pakadhu) with a knife. While he recites mantra, he puts the above mixture on food items brought by the patient. The food is divided into three equal shares; the first for the enemy (satru-bhag), the second for the offence against the enemy (satru-sikar) and the last for the patient's self-satisfaction (atma-santosh). This tantric exercise conducted by the vaidya to cure nakahaigu illness is called by a single Newari term 'ulta mantra yayu' (Lit. to perform a ritual to undo the spells of bewitchmen).

14. Kasayawaigu

When an individual falls in deep sleep at night he can get attacked by some trouble-causing agent- kasaya waigu (probably a particular kind of witch or evil spirit). Once attacked, the individual feels but cannot move any of his body parts. If such attacks are regular, the individual consults a tantric vaidya for the appropriate cure. The vaidya performs incantation (jharpuk) to cure the illness. The practitioner prescribes

an amulet (jantar) to wear on the patient's neck. It is believed that the amulet possesses tantric power against the 'kasāyā waigu.'

15. Sinka Pugu

The informants stated that the illness, sinka pugu, is caused by the 'feast' - god called sinka. The symptoms are loss of appetite and malnutrition. People believe that sinka pugu deo is angered when the house is ritually polluted (chau-chhu) or when it is not offered its share in proper time. Thus, in a feast parts of each food are at first offered to the sinka deo.

For the treatment of sinka pugu illness, a tantric vaidya recommends purification of the patient's house by plastering it with cow-dung. The tantric vaidya asks samples of meat items which the patient wants to eat. The meat prepared and placed before the patient who is ready to eat is snatched by another person. The patient's consecutive attempts to recover the meat are foiled. This is done to punish the patient for he had foiled to offer the share of sinka pugu deo.

Natural Causes

The Newar community of Kirtipur also believe in another category of illnesses - those which have observable cause and effect (i.e. naturalistic). The rational interpretation of disease causation can be seen in the descriptions of the following illnesses. The particular focus of the description, however, is the societal perception of symptoms described and cures used by the traditional medical practitioners.

1. Sarko

The Newars consider a twitch of muscle (sarko) disease caused by disequilibrium inside the human body. To cure the illness a priest or an exorcist who knows spell (sarko-mantra) is consulted. When the practitioner cures the twitch of muscle on one part of the body by mantras, it shifts to another part of the body and affects it. Application of mantra is continued until the illness is not completely cured.

2. Mikhāshyāgu

All types of eye infections are grouped in a single Newari term 'mikhāshyāgu,' which literally means - 'eye sores.' Informants believed that there may be several causes behind eye infections. When one contracts eye-infection he goes to a local pond early in the morning and washes his face with the pond water. This method of treatment is continued until the infection is completely cured.

3. Janāikai

In classical Newari language, the term 'janāi' means sacred cord worn by the twice-born castes in Nepal and 'kai', infected wounds

(khatira-patira) on the skin. The disease 'janāikai' appears as boils on the body in a circular form like a sacred cord. Stomach, waist and chest are the bodily parts where usually janāikai appear. The body part where the boils appear first is called 'head' (chyo) and where it appears last is known as 'tail' (nyaphyo). It is believed that when the boils complete a circle, the person may die. Understandably, when janāikai appears, the sick person immediately consults a tantric vaidya. The vaidya draws two figures of the lion (one at the 'head' and the other at the 'tail' of the infected area) with an ordinary ink pen. In the figures, the opened mouth of the lion faces the boils. It is believed that these two figures of the lion would swallow the boils and within a few days the disease will disappear.

Khotahra kai

Khotahra kai means 'big boils and ulcerations' that appear on the body. There is a local belief that khotahra kai appear when a kind of dis-equilibrium prevail inside human bodily parts. This belief corresponds to the humoral theory of disease causation followed in Ayurvedic and Chinese medical systems.

It is cured by a kind of incense called 'gokul dhup', which is applied on the boil except its mouth. The incense is said to help fester the boil. After the application of incense, the pus comes out. The patient may be suggested to consult an exorcist for protection from the evil eye.

A number of illnesses are attributed to several village deities. People believe that when the village deities remove their protection, (bigrya juima) illness prevail. They are Karunamaya, Indrani, Bag-bhairav, uma-Maheswar, viswakarma, mahankal, Ganesh etc. There are individual shrines and statues for all these deities and people offer regular worship (pujā) for them on auspicious days. Unlike the evil spirits, the village deities do not cause illnesses to an individual without reasons; they are the protective forces for the place and people. If an individual offends them, he suffers from illness. Under such circumstances, he prays to these deities to be saved from their designs. He may promise a worship (pujā) to the affiliated deity at a later date, which must be fulfilled. These deities may withhold their protection for an individual being attacked by evil forces. Thus villagers make regular offerings or worship.

The people believe that their life is affected by gods and goddesses whose shrines are located outside their villages. The Hārati māju, a goddess of small-pox and measles, whose shrine is at Swayambhu, Kathmandu, is worshipped regularly. This is continued even though the small-pox has been already eradicated. Similarly, the Khāyātama deo (the protector of children) of Bhātthateni is also worshipped to ask protection. The Unmatta Bhairav of Gnyaneswor, Sankatā deo of Tebahal, Vijeswari of Sobābhagavati, Kali of Pharping, Matse Narayan of Machhe Gaon and several other gods and goddesses are also worshipped so that they continue to protect people.

Illness and Traditional Medical Practitioners

In the eyes of local people, the traditional medical practitioner's knowledge of illnesses caused by various spirits and meditation for a cure through his use of tantric knowledge (tantra vidya) are valid and rational. His significance and legitimacy among the Newars of Kirtipur must be judged on the above perspective.

The traditional medical practitioner plays an important role in the Newar Community of Kirtipur. People trust him because his practice is grounded on the local traditions. Notwithstanding the fact that the traditional medical practitioner provides vague explanations for the cause of disease, his method of treatment incorporates the emotional aspects of the people.

Prevention of diseases and treatment of minor illnesses are areas where the traditional medical practitioners have their greatest success. It is also evident that their skills are used to appease supernaturalistic forces. There are people who increasingly rely on the modern health facilities. As one put it -- "We approach the traditional medical practitioners to cure several illnesses primarily because it has been our tradition."

The traditional medical workers are accepted by the people because they live in the village, understand the social, cultural and religious backgrounds of the community, provide care by using locally available herbs and minerals (Sharma, 1979:80). Thus, they exert a significant influence on the community by providing primary preventive and curative services. Their diagnosis is mostly based on the local beliefs and thus their treatment makes use of local herbal medicines or recitation of Tantric spells.

Despite widespread popularity of modern medicine⁴ among villagers, the Traditional Medical practitioners claim to have achieved success in controlling the various illnesses and ailments. The practice of traditional medicine is very much alive and its popularity will remain so in the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

The Newars of Kirtipur are quite able to explain and handle different types of illnesses and ailments that prevail in their communities. Perception of illness crisis and organization of care for the sick are viewed as a societal matter rather than merely as an individual affair. Recently, change has been appearing at the realm of illness perception and treatment organization but their faiths in traditional ways of illness interpretation and age old popular methods of curing still remains unshaken.

NOTES

1. I am highly indebted to Prof. Dor Bahadur Bista for giving me opportunity to conduct research in Kirtipur. I owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Chaitanya Mishra for his generous guidance and regular inspiration in each step of my academic exercise. Above all, I wish to express my sincere thanks to the people of Kirtipur who provided fruitful information while preparing the paper.
2. Local Midwives (didī-aji), exorcists (Jhār-phuk-yāima), Vaidyas (vaidya), village astrologers (Joshi), bone setters (Lep taimha), female shaman curers (deo-maiju) are the renowned Traditional Medical Practitioners of Kirtipur.
3. The Chwāsa, is used synonymously with the cross-road in several Newar community studies. But the term Chwāsa as it is used in this paper may not be applied in that general sense, for some Chwāsa in Kirtipur and Panga are not located at the cross-road.
4. Kirtipur provides unique opportunity to observe an interaction between traditional and modern medical systems of Nepal. To an outside observer, there perhaps exists a rivalry between traditional and modern medical systems, but to the local people both systems are mutually complementary.

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