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Talom Rukbo and the Donyipolo Yelam Kebang

Restructuring Adi Religious Practices in Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract
This article outlines the structural changes applied by Adi community activists to the indigenous faith of Donyipolo from the mid-1980s to the present. These new methods of worship, designed and implemented following the establishment of a religious governing body known as the Donyipolo Yelam Kebang, comprise processes that constitute a "formalization" or "institutionalization": the Adi have consciously formatted their faith to mirror the composition of more mainstream religions in an attempt to preserve their heritage and to protect against conversion initiatives. The revival has served as a radical reconstitution of Donyipolo via the introduction of tangible religious representations (the canonization and printing of prayer texts; the introduction of iconographical depictions of deities; and the construction of prayer halls) into a traditionally oral religious landscape that was significantly more fluid. The movement stands as an example of indigenous creativity and adaptation, stemming from a focused community initiative.

Keywords
Donyipolo, Talom Rukbo, Tani, Adi, Arunachal Pradesh, religious change

Introduction

The indigenous religion known as Donyipolo (literally, "Sun-Moon" in the Adi language) functions as the "common but flexible sacred frame" (Mibang / Chaudhuri 2004: 2) of the varieties of faith followed by the Tani

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tribes[1] – the Adi, the Apatani, the Galo, the Nyishi, the Mising,[2] and the Tagin – of Arunachal Pradesh, India, in the Eastern Himalayan foothills. These ethnic communities have historically belief in Abotani ("father-man") as a shared ancestor. At the core of Tani indigenous religion is the exaltation of the divine creation force as manifested through the synthesis of the celestial spheres of the sun *donyi* (female energy) and the moon *polo* (male energy), understood to be the omnipotent, omnipresent eyes of the supreme entity. Beliefs, rituals, and linguistic representations[3] that commonly fall under the categorical umbrella of Donyipolo vary significantly by tribe, sub-tribe, and community; this article focuses primarily on the Adi of Pasighat,[4] East Siang.

Adi Donyipolo has traditionally been characterized by a philosophical framework corresponding to the *aabangs* (oral narratives, mythology) and an ontology defined by ongoing communication and negotiation with a variety of non-human entities (*uyu*), either directly by community members or via particular types of ritual specialists (*miri*). Multiple intermediary deities, such as Dadi Bote (the god of animals), Kine Nane (the god of grain), Gumin Soyin (the god of the house), Doying Bote (the god of humans and wisdom), and Kongki Komang (the god of fate and figure) are recognized as representations of Donyipolo, and, thus, of the creation force. Donyipolo has historically been practiced independently within a given home or collectively in festivals and has not, until recently, included an executive council or any written literature, iconography, or architecture.

Over the past decades, growing awareness of globalization and the expansion of missionary initiatives by Hindu and Christian groups have inspired the Adi to make significant structural changes to these religious practices in an attempt to strengthen cultural identity and to protect against forced or mass conversion. This revival has subsequently spread among fellow Tani tribes, serving as an innovative model for indigenous tradition that has revolutionized the means by which Donyipolo is articulated across the state.

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1 Stuart Blackburn writes that "in the context of northeast India, the term [tribe] does refer to small-scale societies that are marginalized within mainstream sub-continental culture and separated from it by fundamental features such as religion and language, diet, and clothes" (Blackburn 2003: 1). Adi governing bodies, as for example the Adi Agom Kebang (the literary society) and the DPYK, utilize the term "tribe" in official documents.

2 The Mising live primarily in the state of Assam, south of Arunachal Pradesh.

3 The movement and religion broadly referred to as Donyipolo across Tani tribes has specific names and terminology within each, corresponding to the different Tibeto-Burman languages spoken by the groups.

4 Pasighat is the headquarters of East Siang District, with a population of 20,000, predominantly Adi. The Adi, as well as the Adi Minyong and Adi Padam (sub-tribes), are classified as Scheduled Tribes under the Constitution of the Indian Republic.

New methods of worship, designed and implemented following the establishment of the Adi religious governing body known as the Donyipolo Yelam Kebang (DPYK) in 1986, comprise processes that constitute "formalization" or "institutionalization": the Adi have consciously formatted their faith to mirror the composition of more mainstream religions. This reform was largely instigated by the late Talom Rukbo (1937–2001), an Adi activist considered to be the "father" of the revival.

Religious changes enacted by the DPYK include the composition, canonization, and printing of Donyipolo governing rules and prayer texts, the most prominent of which is the *Angun Bedang* ("Way of Light" or "Enlightenment"); the development of anthropomorphic, iconographic representations of Doying Bote, Dadi Bote, Kine Nane, and other divine characters, earlier depicted as straw, bamboo, or twig patterns; the construction of *ganggings* (prayer halls) and the designation of weekly times and days for *gangging* services; the organization of trainings and unions for *taabe* (ceremonial leaders); and the institution of specific holy days and holidays. Since many conversion methods rely on the imposition of structure onto indigenous traditions, which outsiders may perceive as "amorphous" beliefs, by employing this clear and tangible religious blueprint, the Donyipolo movement is succeeding in making Tani peoples less susceptible to missionary action. It is also credited with the revitalization of Adi religion among tribe members who had converted away from the faith.

Yet, in the perception of some local groups and in the small corpus of existing scholarship on this topic the movement is often viewed as a "tribal arm" of the Hindu right, a portrayal that runs counter to the founders' intentions and which invalidates the work of the focused, concerned Adi intellectuals responsible for the revival. As DPYK leader Kaling Borang stated: "Everybody should be clear about this fact: we have never belonged to any sect of Hinduism, nor do we belong today, nor will we ever belong. We have our own religion. It has never been influenced by any faith from the outside. That is what we are trying to preserve" (Interview, Pasighat, 2014).

Much valuable scholarly work on the Donyipolo reformation has come from the Adi community itself, both as part of the early revitalization and as contemporary reflections on its success (i.e., Kaling Borang 2013, 2002; Talom Rukbo 2002, 1998, n.d.). The revival has also been addressed in publications by Max Bearak (2014), Soihiamlung Dangmei (2014), Sarit K. Chaudhuri (2013), Jean-François Mayer (2009), Priyanka P. Narain (2008), Jagdish Lal Dawar (2008, 2004), Paul Harris (1997), and K. S. Singh (1992).

This paper hopes to build on the work of Sarit K. Chaudhuri (2013) by exploring the formalization initiatives that he describes in greater detail and by providing the indigenous identity narrative behind them. By approaching

the Yelam Kebang's history through the words and writings of its founders, this article illuminates the movement as an unprecedented expression of creativity and adaptation that has resulted in the birth, spread, and flourishing of a modern expression of historical Adi belief. The content in this paper stems from fieldwork conducted in 2013, 2014, and 2015 in Arunachal Pradesh and from archival research into the holdings of the International Association for Religious Freedom,[5] an organization that interacted with the DPYK in the early days of the revival.

The founding of the Donyipolo Yelam Kebang

The missionary history of Arunachal Pradesh differs from that of other Northeast Indian states, primarily due to the area's mid-century governance by the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA),[6] which utilized the work of Verrier Elwin, anthropologist and NEFA Director of Research. Administrative approaches to the state's indigenous groups consciously considered the fate of the people's religion in light of the spread of Christianity and Hinduism (see Elwin 1957; Chaudhuri 2013: 261–261). The first pro-indigenous resolution was passed by the Government of India in 1969. Further legislation followed in the next decade, culminating in the 1978 Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Bill. These protective measures ensured that missionary action was less pervasive in Arunachal Pradesh than in other parts of Northeast India. Many forms of overt proselytization by outsiders are still prohibited today.

However, the spread of Christianity in the area had already begun in the nineteenth century and reached Adi communities by the early twentieth (Chaudhuri 2013: 206). Conversions in the Siang districts occurred mid-century as Adi students traveled south to Assam, where they learned to read and write at missionary schools (Bearek 2012). As identity politics expanded and indigenous rights were increasingly recognized, majority religious organizations began to consider new paths for expansion. Wangpon Sabin of the Baptist Church, for instance, claims that in Arunachal Pradesh, Christianity must be viewed as equally "indigenous as Buddhism or Vaishnavism; the only difference being that each of them was accepted by the indigenous people in different periods of history" (Jamatia 2011).

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5 The holdings of the IARF are housed at the Hartley Library, University of Southampton, UK.

6 The North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) was administered by Great Britain and later India, before becoming the (Indian) Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh in 1972.

As Arunachal Pradesh became more closely aligned with the Indian subcontinent, officially becoming the Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh in 1972 (and, ultimately, a state of India in 1987), Hindu groups capitalized on the opportunity to appeal to nationalism by promoting Hinduism as an "Indian religion" (Rikam 2005: 137). Groups such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) employ the conflation of patriotism and Hinduism to convert the recently converted, targeting new Christians (Sarma 2005). Additionally, collaborations with Hindu institutions have undoubtedly benefitted the people: social welfare organizations operated by the Hindu right have funded the establishment of schools since the 1960s, and groups like Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA) and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) have greatly enhanced medical facilities within the state (Dawar 2008: 61–62; Chaudhuri 2013: 274).

The Donyipolo Yelam Kebang (DPYK) was born out of this complicated pietistic tangle. Dawar (2004: 164) and Chaudhuri (2013: 263) trace the beginning of the movement to 28 August 1968, when a meeting was held in Aalo, West Siang, with the aim of facilitating collaboration between the Adi and the Galo,[7] who shared the common goal of cultural preservation. This resulted in the decision to build the Donyipolo Dere (community hall) in Aalo, completed in the early 1970s. The idea to create a building representative of indigenous identity that could be explicitly used for religious purposes would later be manifested in the DPYK's construction of *ganggings*. But the founding of the Yelam Kebang really began with the work of Adi activist Talom Rukbo (1937–2011; born Jine, Pasighat).

Motivated by his own experiences with missionaries, Talom Rukbo claimed that acts of conversion "create social unrest" and constitute "violence of the deepest and gravest kind" (Megu 2010). One of the first Tani to attend university (graduating from St. Edmund's College, Shillong, Meghalaya, in 1960), Rukbo was appointed the Pasighat Language Officer. He then took on the first of several government positions as Sub-Area Organizer in the Home Guards (Sashastra Seema Bal, the Armed Border Force) following the Chinese aggression of the early 1960s. He later served as Special Officer of Cultural Affairs and as Joint Director of Information, before leaving public office in 1972 to devote himself to social activism.

[7] Historically, the Adi and the Galo have sometimes been considered to be two parts of the same tribe (i.e., Dawar 2004: 164). Today, some Galo self-identify as their own tribe with their unique identity, heritage, and faith. The formalized indigenous religion of the Galo is separate from that of the Adi and uses its own prayer text, *Donyi Boi*.

In the following years, Rukbo was instrumental in the founding of the Donyipolo Mission in Itanagar and the Adi Agom Kebang (the literary society) in Pasighat, and in revitalizing the Bogum Bokang, today the Adi Baane Kebang (a high-level dispute resolution council). Rukbo was also an avid poet, dramatist, and folklorist, authoring numerous works about Adi identity, mythology, and heritage. Around the same time, Adi intellectual Arek Megu remembers that he, Rukbo, Oshong Ering, and others began to meet in the Pasighat Youth Club to discuss new ideas for Donyipolo. Included in these discussions were considerations of codifying festival dates, which varied across the Adi belt and which sometimes conflicted with the newly developing school and work schedules (Interview, Pasighat, 2015). In the mid-1980s, Rukbo's participation in conferences organized by the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) inspired the official founding of the Donyipolo Yelam Kebang.

IARF, founded in 1900, is a London-based charitable organization that promotes interfaith dialogue by bringing together different religions. Today, they have member groups in 25 countries. IARF India was founded in 1976 and rapidly expanded in the 1980s, organizing youth programs and regional or international conferences almost annually. Their Indian membership in the early 1980s consisted primarily of Hindu and Christian groups, but also included Seng Khasi – the institution created in 1899 by the Khasi peoples (Meghalaya) to preserve their indigenous faith within the context of a majority conversion to Christianity. Seng Khasi had joined IARF as an associate member group in 1980, and it was later Seng Khasi who supported the official inclusion of Donyipolo in the organization. In the executive minutes of IARF from March 1985, it is noted that Hipshon Roy of the Seng Khasi had suggested that the "Donyi-Polo [*sic*] Mission, a tribal organization in Northeast India" be admitted as an associate member (IARF Archives, MS256 A986/5/33). This official designation followed interactions between Donyipolo members and the IARF over the previous two years (ibid., MS 256 A986/2/21).

In 1985, Talom Rukbo attended the IARF conference "Religious Path to Peace and Integration" held at the Guru Nanak Foundation in New Delhi (ibid., MS256 A986/2/10). He was sponsored by R. K. Patir, former chief secretary of the state, and the Donyipolo Vidya Bhawan school in Itanagar, where he worked as assistant secretary (Borang 2013: 23). Rukbo was joined at this conference by his protégé, Kaling Borang, who had met Rukbo in the early 1980s through the Adi Cultural and Literary Society. Both Borang and Rukbo had been educated outside of Arunachal Pradesh and had witnessed firsthand the troubles that indigenous Arunachali peoples faced when away from their home communities. The collaboration between these two men made

the revival possible: Rukbo was the innovator and Borang was the organizer. Borang describes their partnership as follows (Interview, Pasighat, 2014):

> I was young then; I was a little introverted, didn't talk much. I just listened. But in '82, [Rukbo and I] organized a cultural meeting here in Pasighat. We became very close to each other then. […] He was very dynamic and very resourceful. So I saw that this person could be helped a little – for, at least, running around. I didn't advise on philosophy or writing, but he wanted someone to consult with. So we used to sit together, discuss things, change our whole process of thinking. We tried to find out which [methods of cultural preservation] would be best for the common man.

Rukbo had offered an Adi-language blessing as part of the interfaith worship at the 1985 IARF Conference. For the following year's congress at the Rotary Club in Bangalore, "World Religions Face the 21st Century", Rukbo had Borang translate an original prayer Rukbo had written so that he could share Donyipolo in English (IARF Archives, MS256 A986/2/12; Borang 2013: 24). Borang, too, participated in this conference, speaking about Donyipolo in the context of the theme "Religion for Tomorrow: Our Religious Practice for Daily Life and Peace". Borang's talk reflected an awareness of the need for change, examining the challenges of faith in the present-day and discussing the possibilities for Donyipolo's tomorrow. He closed by saying that Donyipolo, "though [it] appears to be in [its] infant stage, surely has a brighter future. Let us all hope to see Donyi-Polo [*sic*] spread His warmth and light to a larger horizon" (IARF Archives, MS256 A986/2/12). Following this second conference, Rukbo told Borang that the Adi "must have the written scripture on Donyipolo. The learned people say that [for] a faith to be called a religion [it] must have a scripture, it must be prepared and practised. So we must work on it very fast. Unless we do it now, we may not do it at all" (Borang 2002: 3).

Borang elaborates: "After getting exposure outside — looking at the group of organized faiths and religions — we had developed an idea that if our traditional faith can also be organized and institutionalized, it could be rather an example for the whole world." (Interview, Pasighat, 2014). Rukbo and Borang were attuned to their community and were aware that proselytization and globalization, left unchecked, might lead to the disappearance of their culture.

In late December 1986, the Constitution and Bylaws were drafted at the Cultural and Literary Society, with the help of a group of intellectuals that included Tamo Mibang and Arek Megu (Borang 2013: 25). The Donyipolo Yelam Kebang was officially inaugurated on 31 December 1986: Rukbo, Borang, Dibu Moyang, Lube Megu, Tapon Jomang, Arek Megu, and Ogom Dai attended the evening ceremony at Solung Ground, Pasighat (Borang 2013: 26). The DPYK derives its full name from *yelam*, an Adi word meaning

"faith", "old path", "kingdom", and *kebang*, meaning "gathering" and referring also to the historical Adi system of local self-government.

The group continued to meet on Saturday nights to discuss practical plans for social change. Rukbo appealed to the State Government for financing and received five lakh rupees in funding (Borang 2013: 26). In time, members took on increasingly responsible administrative roles; Ogom Dai became the first *taabe,* ceremonial leader (Interview, Dai relative, Pasighat, 2015) and Borang himself soon served as founding general secretary.

Textualization and the *Angun Bedang*

One of the first DPYK projects was the creation of the *Angun Bedang* prayer book. *Angun Bedang*, which means "Way of Light" or "Enlightenment", began as a handful of prayers written by Talom Rukbo. Arek Megu recalls that the composition and recording of prayers had already proved instrumental in the spread of the movement: he pinpoints the "spiritual healing" of an Adi Christian girl by Rukbo's recitation of an original Donyipolo prayer as a turning point for community receptiveness to the Donyipolo revival. The DPYK actively reached out for contributions from others to supplement Rukbo's writings, and, by 1988, had compiled a prayer book. Tajom Tasung, who has served as the general secretary of the DPYK since 2006, remembers donating the fees for the printing of a four-song volume in 1991 (Interview, Pasighat, 2014). A second, longer version was published by the Adi Cultural and Literary Society in 1992.

Today, the *Angun Bedang* books in circulation include between approximately 75 and 139 prayers each and are used in weekly *gangging* services, often distributed during worship to participants who have not brought their own copy. The text, written in a "simplified" version of the *aabang* (oral narrative) Adi language as represented by the Latin alphabet, contains songs for general worship as well as particular prayers against malevolent *uyu,* which are included in services as necessary, depending on the needs of the congregation. The first song, which opens each service, is *Kumdung Donyipolo Nom* ("We pray to you Donyipolo!"); the fourth song,[8] which closes each, is *Nok Kayum Sinam Ager Lok / Ngom Agiinpe Imo Langka*, which speaks of the positive feelings achieved when one has completed work successfully. In addition to these two prayers, between seven and ten selections from the book are also included in a given weekly meeting; "all prayer songs have equal value or importance which have to be selected

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[8] In a 2011 printing of the Angun Bedang this song is the twenty-seventh.

for different or various occasion[s] by the devotees who perform worship" (Rukbo 2002: 18).

The genesis of the *Angun Bedang* – and the DPYK as a whole – relied on the contributions of what Borang refers to as "staff artists", a group of painters, musicians, dancers, and poets working in the Cultural and Literary Society. These "staff artists" were led by musician Tain Tamuk. While Rukbo assembled the *Angun Bedang* texts, Tamuk composed many of their melodies. Tamuk recalls that Rukbo brought him the words of the prayers on 27 December, asking him to compose the melodies by 31 December, the first Donyipolo Day. He took four nights and four days for this task, composing three different tunes for each text. After performing them for a selection committee, which included Rukbo and Borang, at Pasighat Solung Ground he remembers how the "most simple" option for each was ultimately selected (Interview, Rani Village, 2014). It was important that the tunes were easy to remember. In 1989, musician Manik Pao was hired by the Adi Cultural and Literary Society. He would go on to contribute more melodies and harmonies for use in *gangging* services (Interview, Pasighat, 2015).

These songs contributed greatly to the spread of Donyipolo. In the decades prior to formalization, boys who had attended Christian missionary schools in Dum Duma and Sadiya, Assam, would learn Christian hymns. They would return and sing these hymns, spreading the songs throughout the community. Eventually, through methodical action, these Christian songs were replaced by the tunes that Tamuk composed for Rukbo's prayers. Kaling Borang recalls how the *Angun Bedang* gained popularity (Interview, Pasighat, 2014):

> In my village […] I was living in a small hut, very small, only a few square meters, where I could just sleep. So in that small hut, I used to bring small children and talk to them and sing these Adi Donyipolo prayer songs to them. Sometimes I would take a few toffees and give them, like that. When they learned the Donyipolo songs, and started singing around the village, the old people around the village realized that these songs that the small children were singing were no ordinary songs. I put these things in the brains of the adults through these small children. That thing I did very practically. […]
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> When the Angun Bedang was published, I used to carry them in my rucksack, distribute the books. I would teach the villagers how this chanting during worship should be done. [This was] '87, '88. I used to go around – my shirt and pants, they got all torn, because I used to go around doing this.

The DPYK also made audio recordings and distributed them (Narain 2008). Rukbo and Borang traveled across the Siang districts sharing the new ideas. An elderly woman in Aalo recalls their visit to her home; she gave them two sacks of rice, not knowing when they would next have the chance to stop and

eat (Interview, Aalo, 2014). A *gangging* official recalls how in the early days Rukbo would solicit passers-by, such as women going to market to sell their goods, and sing the Donyipolo songs to them (Interview, Pasighat, 2015).

In the informational texts *Directive Principles of Donyipolo Yelam* and *Donyipoloism through Questions and Answers*, Rukbo outlined the code of conduct and the theological platform for the DPYK. The *Directive Principles* includes guidelines for the creation and decoration of *ganggings*, rules concerning the new scripture and copyright laws, and legislation for the recently instituted holidays, including Donyipolo Day (31 December), a celebration meant to include flag hoisting, mass prayer, oath-taking, feasting, and a cultural competition of song and dance (Rukbo 2002: 17). It also addresses the administrative duties of office holders and members, regulations concerning animal sacrifice (to be conducted only during festivals), and ordinances for "trials of truth", marriage, property rights, post-fire rituals, graveyard land, burial and funeral rites. In *Questions and Answers*, Rukbo explains Adi ontology and mythology, elaborates on historical practices, and suggests moral guidelines for Donyipolo followers (Rukbo n.d.).

Rukbo was specific about terminology and even punctuation. There had been earlier debates not only about which words should be used as the equivalent of "God" by the DPYK but also about the name of the movement. Some proposed Donyipolo / Donyipoloism ("Sun-Moon") and some Sedi / Sedism (referring to the creator of Earth). The term Donyipolo was formally adopted by the movement. Rukbo went on to specify that when presented as Donyipolo, with no hyphen, the term represents "God", the "spiritual meaning"; Donyi-Polo, with a hyphen, represents the sun and the moon, the "physical meaning"; and Donyipolo spirit is explained as "faith", the "philosophical meaning" (Rukbo 2002: vii). This clarification allowed for the textualization of his two-tiered approach to Donyipolo: the material planets of the sun and moon as well as their "synthetic form […] the power which is absolute that governs the universe" (Rukbo n.d.: 1). Scholar Jogendra Nath, a friend of Rukbo's, suggested the removal of the hyphen when referring to the religion, understanding that in Adi cosmology the entities of Donyi and Polo have merged in worship, making Donyipoloism the appropriate choice (Nath 2013: 55). Current DPYK leaders, including Borang, are still today specific that the preferred term for the faith is Donyipolo, without a hyphen, so as to accurately represent this synthesized meaning.

Directive Principles of Donyipolo also endows the physical *Angun Bedang* book with sanctity, stating that legal action will be taken against those who destroy or tear it (Rukbo 2002: Directive 20, vi). Additionally, "if [a person possesses] any scripture of other faith, it should be seized and Donyipolo book should be presented to the person" (Rukbo 2002: Directive 27, h). There are strict rules governing the copyright, translation, and sale of the *Angun Bedang*. The aim of these regulations, however, was not to make

the words static; the DPYK retains the right to make amendments to the content as necessary (Directive 7: iii).

Prayer halls – *ganggings*

Rukbo's decision that each DPYK "unit" should have one such building for weekly "mass prayer" (Rukbo 2002: 1–2) led to the institution of the *gangging*. While projects in East Siang as early as the 1960s conceptualized town halls and the Donyipolo Dere was established in Aalo in the 1970s, the construction of the Central Gangging in 1986, in Pasighat, was transformative. The term *gangging* originates from *gangging* Siring, "an imaginary land or spiritual tree that exists somewhere in-between the spiritual and natural world from where every object of living and non-living came into existence" (Rukbo in Chaudhuri 2013: 4). Historically, the Adi had worshipped independently in their homes, with little in the way of ritual or altar organization (Regunathan 1999: 146). Kaling Borang explained how the need for *ganggings* arose (Interview, Pasighat, 2014):

> We were practising in our houses, separately, in an unorganized manner. There was a necessity then to rethink whether this institutionalized faith should be practiced in the traditional community hall – but then, when we looked to the pros and cons of this, we found that there are a few traditional restrictions that don't match with [our] needs [and what] we're trying to do […] like taboos. So this led us to think to have a separate place to practice this faith. So the *gangging* came up. It is a completely new institution created specifically for the purpose of the Donyipolo Yelam. […] Today there are *ganggings* in almost every village, even spreading into the Mising in Assam, because we belong to the same group of people, the Tani. Talom Rukbo took me there; we visited many Mising villages in Assam and talked about all these things. Slowly they understood it, and built their own *gangging*.

According to Tajom Tasung, DPYK secretary, there are today 256 *ganggings* across Arunachal Pradesh and Assam (Interview, Pasighat, 2014).[9] Funds for *gangging* construction almost always come from community donations. All *ganggings* are administered at a local level, but are overseen by the Central Gangging in Pasighat. The need for centralization stems in part from the varying rituals and dialects extant within sub-tribes. These site-specific differences have also led to the creation of the role of the *taabe*, the ceremonial leader. While the *taabe* oversee the *gangging* services, their positions are distinct from those of the varieties of *miri* (ritual specialists within

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9 Other estimates are higher. The exact number is hard to determine, however, as new *ganggings* are constantly being built (such as in the villages of Mariyong and Riga at the time of writing).

the community, who are understood to have certain supernatural abilities such as *aabang* knowledge, healing ability, "spirit" helpers, etc.[10]). The DPYK organizes orientations for *taabe*; the goal is to ensure that services are officiated in a similar manner in all *ganggings* by instructing *taabe* in official DPYK methods (Interviews, Pasighat, 2014, 2015).

The *ganggings* are rectangular buildings with one primary altar wall. Rukbo described the need for cleanliness both around and inside the building: the concentric circle symbol, meant as a meditative representation of Donyipolo, should be displayed; a veranda for shoes should be built; gardens of medicinal herbs and colored flowers should be planted; and the area should be protected from animals with a fence and from people with a lock and key. He suggested particular decorations for the inside of the *gangging*, including electric flower lights and art representing indigenous heritage; however, materials of "spirit worship" (*ipak leemo*) are forbidden, as are animal skulls (Rukbo 2002: vii). Designated prayer materials include *emul*,[11] *ridin*,[12] candle,[13] *agarbati* incense (as a "symbol of sweet fragrance of worship"), alms,[14] and *asi* (water [Adi]; "holy water for sanctification") (Rukbo 2008, 1–2; 7–8).

Contemporary services and decoration are in keeping with these guidelines described by Rukbo in *Directive Principles*. During a service[15] – held Saturday or Sunday, depending on the *gangging* – men and women sit cross-legged, separated by gender, facing the altar, often on individual mats (usually men on the left, women on the right). Prior to the ceremony, the *taabe* or officiator will often tie a bracelet of *ridin* onto the attendant's wrist (though in some services this occurs immediately after the service). Altar walls are adorned with the concentric circle design and images of two or more of the prominent deities, usually Doying Bote (the deity of humans), Dadi Bote (the deity of animals), and Kine Nane (the deity of grain) – though sometimes also

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[10] Particularly in more remote villages, a local *miri* may, by default, become the *taabe* of a *gangging*, but the ceremonial and social roles of the *taabe* and the varieties of *miri* are very different.

[11] Sacred ornaments that can be rung like bells; "metal ornament[s] used [by a priest only] in [the] performance of [a] rite for healing [poor] health (Rukbo 2002: 7)"

[12] "A medicinal plant (creeper) used as life saviour [*sic*] string" that is considered to be a "divine umbilical cord" in Adi mythology (Rukbo 2002: 7)

[13] As a "symbol of aspiring spirit with heart and soul" and "an alternative to fire in tradition (Rukbo 2002: 7)"

[14] As a "symbol of offering of dedication", which "should be done by each devotee" along with the ringing of the emul before and after (Rukbo 2002: 7–8)

[15] These descriptive generalizations draw on the author's observation of Adi *gangging* services in East Siang District, Siang District, West Siang District, Upper Siang District, and Itanagar in 2013, 2014, and 2015.

depictions of Konki Komang, Liitu Limang, or other illustrations of the *aabang* narratives. Altars include *emul*, incense, and candles, as per the *Directive Principles*. Sometimes one or two clocks are placed on the wall behind. Copies of the *Angun Bedang* may be distributed by a *taabe*; usually two or three

FIGURE 1: Pasighat Central Gangging, established 1986, in its current building. The Donyipolo flag, a symbol of the movement, is flown from the roof.

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taabe orchestrate the service. Services last approximately an hour, and include singing the prayer texts and call-and-response chanting between the *taabe* and the congregation. Following each prayer song is the invocation *Bomyerung Donyipolo* ("Glory to Donyipolo!"). Time is set aside for general discussion and community announcements. Attendees remain seated for the majority of the *gangging* service, though may stand for certain songs. (Rukbo designated in Directive 13 that all should rise for the closing hymn, *Nok Kayum Sinam Ager Lok / Ngom Agiinpe Imo Langka*). At some point in the ceremony, a *taabe*

may perform healings or offer blessings, often through dripping holy water from a leaf.

The establishment of the *gangging* system was not intended to replace all private ritual in the home, which has continued to be encouraged. Rather, through this centralization of worship, the DPYK has allowed for an experience of Donyipolo faith that follows similar parameters across the state.

Iconography

Borang remembers that the decision to introduce iconography was contentious: “We had very, very long arguments, debates, discussions [about] putting an image for worship. That was a big question. Ultimately we came to the decision that we need to have the image.” (Interview, Pasighat, 2014). Rukbo had felt that iconography was something that all religions had, and, more so, that such symbols functioned as unifying forces for the people (Rukbo n.d.: 12). Today, anthropomorphic drawings of deities are acknow-

FIGURE 2: Altar of Lamrung Gangging, Solung Ground, Pasighat, with the concentric circle design and images of deities designed by Rukbo and painted by Dai.

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ledged as the illustration of the imaginary; it is the force behind the illustration that is worshipped. A given image is designed to be a medium through which concentration can help guide one to the divine.

These new depictions include concentric circles representative of Donyipolo, today widely used on gangging altars and Donyipolo amulets. This design was painstakingly created; the different colors represent tenets and concepts within the faith (Interviews, Komkar / Yingkiong, 2015). The new images also include illustrations of deities that represented them in their relative "human" and personified forms. Historically, iconographical representations of this sort were rare in Adi society, and worship utilized only structures made from bamboo, straw, or twigs.[16] It could be argued that, prior to formalization, visual representations of the non-human were perhaps even stigmatized in certain Tani narratives. Legend claims that when Galo ritual specialist and were-tiger Kachi Yomcha made iconographical depictions of Topo Gone, he was relieved of his "warm feeling of desire towards the forest", but also became the cause of multiple deaths when one statue turned into a malevolent *uyu* (non-human entity) that ate many village children (Riba 2004: 125–128). The creation of iconography, then, can perhaps be viewed as an ideological shift in local perception of divine images, one that changes them from powerful and dangerous to transcendent and meditative.

Borang explains that the imagery was created through the marriage of "two artists", "one who can imagine, another who could see that imagination and bring it into pictures" (Interview, Pasighat, 2014). These men were Talom Rukbo and Komeng Dai. Artist Komeng Dai (1948/49–1994) was untrained but immensely talented. Osam Dai, sister of Komeng, recalls that Rukbo, along with cultural officer Subuk Tasung, had organized a conference for the recitation of *aabangs* – oral narratives. Rukbo invited Dai to come and listen to the *aabangs* and urged him to illustrate them (Interview, Pasighat, 2015). Dai painted depictions of multiple scenes from the *aabangs* that hang today in Lamrung Gangging, Pasighat. He created also the popularized depictions of deities Kine Nane, Doying Bote, and Dadi Bote that are mass-produced and displayed in most *ganggings* across the state. These images were meticulously detailed; the ages, clothes, and surroundings of each deity were deliberately considered and illustrated from the *aabang* verses. A *taabe* explained the shift in this manner: "Our mind had the gods in it. In our head was Doying Bote, Dadi Bote, Kine Nane. Talom Rukbo made them [visual]." (Interview, Itanagar, 2013).

[16] Rukbo cited the Mopin festival as the exception to this rule (Rukbo n.d.: 15).

Expansion

By the late 1980s, the movement was growing rapidly. The DPYK initiated bi-annual youth courses, sharing the new Donyipolo media that participants could then distribute in their home towns (Rukbo 2005: 36; cited by Chaudhuri 2013: 208). Adi villagers across the Siang districts had taken it upon themselves to build their own *ganggings*, inviting the increasingly busy Rukbo and Borang to come to see them. Donyipolo spread from the Siang districts to Lohit and then to Naharlagun and Itanagar in the West (Chaudhuri 2013: 207–208). Kaling Borang recalls that in these same years, outreach expanded to include other Tani tribes (Interview, Pasighat, 2014).

> I remember I went with Talom Rukbo to Itanagar to a conference of the Tani group of people. We took typed scripture – the *Angun Bedang* – we took typed copies, and distributed them to all the participants and different groups. They had no experience; they said they needed guidance. So we gave them copies, asking them to read it, how these prayer songs could be written in their language. When they saw it, they understood it properly, and started doing it in their own language. That was the guidance that Talom Rukbo gave to the Tani group about scripture. It was year 1988, 1989.

Parallel movements among other Tani groups developed as each tribe customized the new religious framework to their specific heritages, developing their own texts, iconography, and worship systems.[17] This had been one of Rukbo's aims: "[Tani groups] must realize their images and offer prayers […] I see this happening under a common umbrella of Donyipoloism. We must not relegate our language and our culture to the background in the course of social change." (Rukbo in Harris 1997).

Following the establishment of the Northeast Faith and Cultural Protection Forum the DPYK began to interact more frequently with the groups of Heraka (Nagaland), Seng Khasi (Meghalaya), and the Mizo (Mizoram). In the 1990s, the Donyipolo revival would contribute to the development of the institutionalized religion of Rangfraa among the Tangsa tribes in the East.[18] DPYK collaboration with the International Association for Religion Freedom (IARF) also continued through the 1980s and into the next decade. In 1990, Talom Rukbo – along with Oshong Ering and Galo intellectual Tumpak Ete – attended the "Religions Cooperating in One World" congress in Hamburg, Germany, where they participated in a workshop on indigenous religious communities (IARF Archives: MS256

[17] See Chaudhuri 2013 for a brief summary of Danyi-Piilo among the Apatani, Nyedor-Namlo among the Nyishi, and the Galo Donyipolo movement.

[18] See the article by Meenaxi Barkataki-Ruscheweyh in this volume for an overview of the Rangfraa movement.

A986/1/17; Interviews, Oshong Ering, Pasighat, 2014, 2015; Tumpak Ete, Aalo, 2014).

Talom Rukbo died in 2001. Tributes across Arunachal Pradesh honored his life and his achievements, and his casket was covered with the DPYK flag. The groundbreaking changes he had brought about led to his honorific name of Golgi Bote, a title referring to a plant that is perpetually in bloom. Today, his picture is placed on altars in Donyipolo *ganggings*, beside the new iconography that he commissioned. A hagiographic literature has emerged around his life, detailing his work ethic, praising his vision, even describing the miracles surrounding his death.[19] A recent memorial in *The Arunachal Times* reads: "Why [did] God not send [Talom Rukbo to] this earth at least before the British stepped in to this holy land of [the] rising sun[?] [O]ur socio-

FIGURE 3: Shrine for remembrance of Golgi Bote Talom Rukbo at the base of the altar of Lamrung Gangging, Solung Ground, Pasighat.

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[19] These narratives include stories of the "life-like" qualities of his corpse (O. Rukbo 2013: 19) as well as the "halo" that formed on a photograph of his coffin. As of 2014, this photograph was housed on the altar of Boying Gangging, Pasighat.

cultural identity would have remained undisturbed and our own brothers would not have parted from us. However, it is better late than never." (Megu 2010).

Over the years, the DPYK has expanded its social reform initiatives, offering literacy classes in *ganggings*, promoting temperate alcohol consumption, and working with local farmers to grow citronella. "Today, when I see that this organization [the DPYK] has enlarged itself, many times I say that I am the happiest man in the world by seeing my own work grow so much," says Borang. "This movement was rather a generator" (Interview, Pasighat, 2014).

Controversies

The religious landscape of the Adi post-DPYK is more nuanced than this article has been able to present. Many Adi still follow any of a number of "pre-formalization" indigenous articulations of Donyipolo, while interacting with the DPYK to varying degrees, or not at all. Institutionalization initiatives of the Yelam Kebang have required the Adi to make certain religious distinctions that they earlier had not had occasion to consider. The introduction of structure required administrative decisions and a determination of certainty where there was previously doctrinal fluidity. I once asked a young man from a village in West Siang – who follows indigenous Adi faith but, by circumstance, has not involved himself with the DPYK or attended the *gangging* – what his word for "God" would be, Donyipolo or Sedi. He replied: "I don't know, I have never had to decide." (Interview, Rono Hills, 2014).

Despite ongoing clarifications by DPYK leaders that they in no way identify as Hindu, the question of how to categorize the "formalized" Donyipolo persists for many. Researchers such as Jagdish Lal Dawar (2008: 62), Moji Riba (2005: 119), and Sarit K. Chaudhuri (2013: 275) identify what they view as at least partial Hindu influences within the structure of the movement, and some Hindu and indigenous peoples from both Arunachal Pradesh and neighboring states have indicated that they believe Donyipolo to be intertwined with the Hindu right (Interviews, Assam / Meghalaya, 2013, 2014, 2015). Soihiamlung Dangmei (2014) has further contextualized the Donyipolo movement in light of the history of such Hindutva initiatives. An anonymous Arunachali essay by a Tani author, circulating in print and online, states explicitly that the writer views Donyipolo as "an alternate form of Hinduism […] with nothing indigenous about it" ("A.G." 2008: 10). "I'm an animist or an atheist, if ever I'm asked about my religion. Why? Because [Donyipolo] is totally devoid of the rituals that have been performed since time immemorial" (ibid.).

Certain Hindu organizations do "recruit" in the Northeast by supporting the institutionalization of tribal faith, and groups such as Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA) aim to create a "pan-Hindu identity" through connecting with indigenous groups by deifying their leaders. Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), aligned with the Bharatiya Janata Party, has organized various events to memorialize Rukbo in Pasighat and elsewhere (Bearek 2014). Rukbo has been posthumously named as one of the "historical figures who left an indelible mark in their struggle against foreign rule" by the VKA (Economic Times 2004). He has been portrayed as a "tribal hero" in Hindu literature by Akhil Bhartiya Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (Dawar 2008: 62) and included in illustrations of Bharat Mata (Mother India) that continue to circulate widely.

However, the DPYK administration has long been cognizant of how such affiliations might be perceived. Internal conversations reflect differing views on how much involvement with other religious organizations is appropriate. In the early days, Borang and Rukbo were keenly aware of the community's pulse, and proceeded cautiously – Borang sometimes had to remind Rukbo that his attendance at certain Hindu functions might be misconstrued. These discussions continue today, evidenced, for example, in administrative debates about the inclusion of a meditative chant at the start of *gangging* services; the proposed chant would consist of the word *keyum* – the primordial void from which all things originate in Adi cosmology – but some voice concerns that this might be viewed as too reminiscent of the Hindu *aum* (Interviews, Pasighat, 2014, 2015). The DPYK has had to walk a fine line between working alongside fellow religious institutions in a collaborative manner and being consistently required to defend their identity as separate from these organizations. Borang says: "I tell Hindutva, if you want to help us, help us with sincerity. Don't misinterpret what we are." (Interview, Pasighat, 2014). Oson Rukbo, son of Talom Rukbo, speaks similarly: "People used to say it is influenced by Hinduism. There is not any connection between Donyipoloism and Hinduism." (Interview, Pasighat, 2014).

New indigeneities

In discussions about Donyipolo, there seems to be an unspoken assumption that the difference between *faith* and *religion* is the latter's incorporation of an overtly organized structure. Talom Rukbo himself made this distinction in telling Borang that "[for] a faith to be called a religion [it] must have a scripture" (Borang 2002: 3). Rukbo's words perhaps suggest that he viewed *religion* as a more sustainable version of *faith*, operating on the principle that the two are separate avenues through which one belief system could potentially

be expressed. But those etic to the movement who reduce Donyipolo to "purely" a form of Hinduism appear to think that it has become so primarily *because* it now employs the "structure" more commonly affiliated with religion: the pervasive current in these criticisms is that indigeneity cannot occupy the same conceptual space as reformation, and that indigeneity cannot be anything new. Such statements also indicate an unacknowledged prioritization of framework over content, insinuating that theological affiliation of a denomination is defined by its methods of worship and not by its God. The persistent exonymous categorization of Donyipolo as a form of Hinduism is not supported by its genesis or by the self-identification of the majority of its practitioners.

Current scholarship on the study of religions has begun to address issues of indigeneity in a globally connected world, urging researchers to adopt a braver, more delicate approach to our categorizations and the impact that they may have on the groups with which we work (Tafjord 2015, 2013; Kraft / Johnson forthcoming). At the heart of these considerations must be the acknowledgement that "indigenous" is not the same as "unchanging" and, in fact, means very different things in different contexts. In the case of the Donyipolo movement, we are asked to expand our comprehension of indigenous religion to recognize a newly structured articulation of historical Adi Donyipolo.

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