

## CULTURAL RESPONSE OF CAR NICOBARESE TO TSUNAMI

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### *Abstract*

This article explores Moran's human adaptability approach in dealing with uncertain environments and the cultural responses of human populations to stressful conditions. In order to test this conceptual framework, the structural features of Car Nicobarese social organization such as *kūōnkūō* or *tō-ngōōnka* (lineage unity), *hinēngō panam* or *manūō panam* (village unity), *harūk* (child adoption), *inlōm*: (rules of residence), are analyzed from emic point of view. These conditions and factors are embedded in nature and create impeccable unity among consanguine, affine and *hol* (traditional friends) towards collective action in the recuperation of the community from the earthquake and tsunami devastation in the Nicobar Islands. The paper further argues that it is the cultural adjustment factor, rather than physiological or behavioral, that plays a significant role in the resurrection of internal solidarity during exigencies.

### **Introduction:**

Frequent natural disasters have been severely affecting millions of human lives as well as properties throughout the world. These not only destabilize the physical properties, but uproot the invaluable cultural heritage of the communities concerned. The form and nature of disasters vary from one area to another and similarly responses of human beings also differ in time and space (Fritz, 1968). The diversity of such responses, whether it be biological or cultural, facilitate the adjustment of individuals to the formative period of disasters and is flexible enough to adapt to the situation. Of these, cultural response is implicit in adaptation of the community in mobilizing its human as well as natural resources for survival in volatile living conditions. The response of the Car Nicobarese (herein after 'the Nicobarese') to the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami illustrates this point of view where the kin networks provided space to accommodate the changes that are brought about by this unexpected event.

The Nicobar group of islands are part of the Union Territory of Andaman and Nicobar Islands, an island chain in the middle of the Bay of Bengal. They are about 300 kilometers from the eastern sea board of mainland India and lie between 9° 17' 48" North latitudes and 92° 42' 15" East longitudes. The island group is further separated from the Andaman group of islands to the north by the 150 km. wide Ten Degree Channel. The southern the island is 189 km. from the northern tip of Sumatra. The Nicobars are a conglomeration of twenty two islands and are

clustered in three groups i.e., *Pu* (Car Nicobar), *Mout* (Nancowry) and *To Kirong Long* (Great Nicobar). Compared to other islands, Car Nicobar is flat whereas the Southern Islands of the group are hilly and forested. However, a slight elevation towards its centre is found which rises to about 200 feet above MSL in North-East near a place called Pāssa (Shyam Choudhury, 1977).

Though many comparable cultural traits are observed among the Nicobarese, each island has an identity of its own with a distinct language. As such, the present study is confined to Car Nicobar Island only as it represents two-thirds population of entire Nicobar Islands with marked linguistic and somatic similarities. The oval shaped island consists of fifteen villages with an average of 1280 people in each village. All the villages are situated on the sea coast only.

The Nicobarese are listed as one of the Scheduled Tribes of India. The physical characteristics of Car Nicobarese range from 146.1 cm. to 173.7 cm. in stature with a mean of 158.7 cm. They are fairly muscular and obesity is seldom noticed among them. The mean weight is 55.03 kilograms and the mean pelidisi index is 97.8 indicating a more or less normal nutritional status. About two-thirds of Car Nicobarese are dolichocephalic and less than one-third are mesocephalic. Individuals with yellowish brown skin are found in majority. They possess straight hair with medium to coarse texture. The frequency of dark-brown and black brown eyes is very high. Concave nasal profile is very common (Ganguly 1976).

The Nicobarese generally speak the Car Nicobar dialect which is similar to the Austro-Asiatic sub-family of languages. In the recent past, they have adopted Latin script for their language (Das 1977). The traditional dress *ngong* (petticoat) and *kisat* or *ning* (loin cloth) are replaced by modern clothes. But still women wear *lungi* or *sarong* and a blouse that resembles the dress pattern of Burmese, Karen or Malay women. The Nicobarese are non-vegetarian. They also consume traditional foods like pandanus, yam, banana, coconut, wild roots, tubers and fruits along with rice and pulses.

The social organization of the Nicobarese could be understood from the *tuhēt* (lineage group) system as it facilitates socio-economic integrity of its members. *Tuhēt* is a consanguine group related by birth wherein no individual possesses exclusive inheritance rights over the land and resources but it is the *tuhēt* as a whole that possesses rights over the resources within their territory. It is a cluster of joint families that symbolizes a maximal lineage in the Nicobarese community. As a rule, a *tuhēt* has a primary house, which is employed for hosting annual village festivals, traditional sports like canoe-race, pig-fight and other needs of the *tuhēt* such as holding intra-*tuhēt*'s councils for raising horticultural garden, plantations and other activities of the *tuhēt* in general.

When certain lineage members of a *tuhēt* separate themselves from the parent one on account of serious disputes and establish a separate identity as a new *tuhēt* it is referred to as *mīröötö* and *kinēm*. The latter two terms are synonymously applied for the purposes. As per

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established customary norms, separated lineage members of the parent *tuhēt* shall have no access to the coconut and areca nut plantations, horticultural gardens, etc., and the same is true for all members of the newly established *tuhēt*. They will be allotted land in their ancestral property. For all practical purposes they (members of these social units) collectively organize *Ossuary* feasts, calendrical festivals, life-cycle rituals, etc., under the banner of their original *tuhēt* and are usually referred to as *mīrööttöre* (maximal lineage group). As per established traditions, the *tuhēt*'s properties cannot be alienated. By virtue of their genealogical ties, all the members automatically possess usufruct rights over their *tuhēt*'s properties as long as they are associated with that *tuhēt*. Cultivation of coconut, areca nut and other garden crops is a main economic activity besides fishing, and pig herding. Inter island exchange is a marked feature of the Nicobarese society which facilitates them to obtain scarce resources. Monogamy is the social norm among the Car Nicobarese, whereas rule of residence is bi-local in nature depending on the need of the members in the *tuhēt* and family. Their behaviour is obedient in nature and amenable for social control. Though majority of them converted to new religious faith i.e., Christianity, and Islam (very few) they still believe in the animistic powers and hence appease them during ceremonial occasions.

Despite the fact of culture-contact, Car Nicobarese still live in coexistence with their natural surroundings and have developed a symbiotic relationship with the sea and forests. However, this peaceful co-existence was shattered by the unexpected disaster in the form of the earthquake and tsunami on 26th December 2004. All the villages of Car Nicobar and its people have been uprooted from their place of original settlement and temporarily sheltered in new locations. Though various relief organizations swung into action, in collaboration with the government, to aid the victims unfavourable weather conditions and geographical isolation, scarcity of resources, both human as well as natural and services continue to hamper post disaster rehabilitation measures. As a result the Nicobarese have been compelled to rely on their traditional sources for survival as an alternative.

### **Theoretical Outline:**

Human behaviour is influenced a lot by traditional knowledge, value systems and other socio-cultural practices. The means of living is intertwined in their basic cultures and plays an important role in maintaining social order and sustainability. Keeping this in view, cultural approach to the study of human adaptability gained momentum in the domain of anthropology to understand the coping behaviour of humans in ever changing environments. The empirical studies of Radcliff-Brown (1922), Whitehead (1924), Darryl Forde (1934), Evans-Pritchard (1940), Julian H. Steward (1955), Rappaport (1963), Vidyarthi (1963), Prakash Reddy (1982), etc., elucidate functional adaptabilities of small communities to nature through complex network of socio-cultural processes. Hence, the present study tries to test this theoretical assumption through a case study of Car Nicobarese from an anthropological perspective.

### **Methodology:**

The present study is basically a qualitative anthropological study aimed at understanding the emic view of Car Nicobarese on their self-management skills in rehabilitation. Primary data for this paper was collected during fieldwork in connection with the regional project 'Impact of Earthquake and Tsunami on the People of Andaman and Nicobar Islands' launched by

Anthropological Survey of India soon after the tsunami disaster. In order to fulfill the objective of the study, qualitative anthropological techniques i.e., participant observation, key informant interviews, case studies, verbal group discussions, and interviews using a detailed checklist have been conceived. Household schedules covering socio-economic and demographic details of the community have also been used for collection of quantitative data. Since it is a longitudinal study, entire Car Nicobar Island is taken as universe rather than selection of sample villages or households for analysis. However, this study is not exempt from the limitations of unfavorable weather conditions, language and interaction with traumatized people.

### **Tsunami and its Impact:**

Due to its proximity to the epicenter of the earthquake, Car Nicobar Island experienced the giant waves that rushed about 1.5 to 2.5 kilometers inland in great force and caused lot of damage to life and property of the Nicobarese. Due to ingress of seawater, sand and coral pebbles have been deposited on the coast of Kakana, Aurong and Sawai villages up to an average of 10 feet above the high water mark. With this, the level of shallow waters came down drastically affecting fishing in this zone to some extent. High tide level increased and submergence of sea coast is still found in low lying areas. As a result of this, low tide line has also risen. The sedimentation of coral pebbles in the creek where mangroves are located, cutting across the borders of Kimious and Aurong villages has been hampering fish breeding. Further, coastal coconut and areca nut plantations have been uprooted and deposited far inland.

The loss of life in Car Nicobar Island was around 745 souls including those Car Nicobarese who were living on other islands. Of these, 484 belong to the villages of Kimious (279), Kakana (101) and Aurong (104), the worst affected villages of Car Nicobar. Tamaloo village was less affected in terms of loss of lives with slight damage to road side dwellings due to inundation of sea water. The deaths had great impact on the lives of women and children as is evident from the decreasing sex ratio after tsunami. The pre-tsunami sex ratio of Kimious, Kakana and Aurong villages were 718, 843 and 946 respectively, whereas, after tsunami, it comes to 676, 819 and 946, while it is 887 for the entire Car Nicobar. Since the mate selection is preferable within the village; the existing sex ratio may affect future marriage pattern in the badly affected villages (Sahani and Prasad, 2007).

The inundation also caused destruction of the coconut and betel-nut plantations of the Car Nicobarese including their livestock. The coconut plantations spread about 10,000 ha in Car Nicobar with a density of more than 524 palms per hectare, of which, one-third of the plantation near the seashore was uprooted, and the remaining trees that were able to withstand have also been affected by stagnant saline water. Inside the forest, plantation and food resources like pandanus, wild roots and tubers and other vegetation, remained intact as the wave was unable to travel that far.

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After tsunami the Nicobarese have been rehabilitated in temporary shelters that were constructed in new locations (inside the forest) on their unaffected *tuhēt's* landed property and plantations of their respective villages. The roof and side rafters of temporary shelters are covered with tin sheets and the flooring is done with cement. It is very uncomfortable to stay in tin-roofed shelters in hot and humid conditions. In the villages like Kimious, and Lapathi some of the *tuhēt's* dwelling area was totally submerged and hence the inhabitants were temporarily relocated in plantation areas of other villages till they shift to new location.

The impact of the tsunami is visible not only in the physical properties of the Nicobarese but also on their socio-cultural aspects too. The flooding of sea water destroyed their material artifacts such as *āp* or *hodi* (outrigger canoe) used for fishing as well as racing, *chanvi* (community house), *pai* (hut having stilt platform) and other common *chūök kamhul* (kitchen houses), classified homesteads and *sanrā* (huts) of certain elites and erudite besides their movable properties such as two wheelers, sewing machines, mechanized boats and so forth. Loss of carpentry tools have had bearing on handicrafts like basketry and *chāmam* (mat) making as these are required in day to day living. Not only the loss of material objects, but also the ill-fated demise of *tōhuveū-en* (medicine men), *kamāsūn* (ritual specialists), and craftsmen was an irreparable loss to the community.

Post tsunami all the villagers were forced to reside in shelters as individual families instead of joint families due to relocation of settlement area. The congested nature of temporary shelters restricted their wide range of economic activities like drying of coconut, areca nut and traditional extraction of oil, etc., to their *tāvat* (inner forest) only. The scarcity of wild palm leaves and coconut leaves (for thatching) is causing undue delay in construction of permanent settlement in new location. The compactness of the new locations had an impact on the observance of so many recreational as well as cultural activities in the village. The rough seas further restrain them from venturing into other islands for making out-rigger canoes and the traditional exchange of goods and services.

Despite these adverse conditions, institutional frameworks such as *tuhēt*, *manūlö el-tuhēt* (lineage unity) *manūlö el pinamen* or *hīnēngö panam* (village unity) etc., continued to play a significant role in mobilizing peoples participation in rehabilitation of their community. The revival and active functioning of these institutional mechanisms has become a major adaptation strategy for the Nicobarese to cope up with the problems caused by the tsunami in the post disaster period.

### **Social Adaptation and Sustenance:**

The kin networks, rules of lineage, and institutions of the Car Nicobarese enforce collective participation of its own group during the ceremonials and life-crisis situations. This solidarity acts as a catalyst in utilizing its own labour and organizes its members for resource utilization and production for consumption.

***Tuhēt and Kinēm: (Kin Groups)***

These two kin groups are major components of Car Nicobarese social organization whose genealogical links are spread outside the village. The attachment to their birth ramage is maintained through the observance of *tuhēt* related ceremonial activities from time to time. Further, this unity is expressed in the rituals associated with horticulture and other economic activities. As already stated, the meaning of the term *tuhēt* is a group of related ascending kin who not necessary live collectively at a particular place. Some of their homesteads are located elsewhere on their ancestral properties or lands allotted to them purely for residing on them. Each *tuhēt* consists of joint families, organized under the control of a *mā-kūō tuhēt* (head of the lineage). He is responsible to the head of his *tuhēt* and organizes the activities of his own group. Since cultivable land is allocated proportionately to its joint families, no property is held at *tuhēt* or *kinem's* disposal, whereas certain portion of plantation and horticulture garden is reserved for contribution to *tuhēt* by each family. The harvest is utilized during celebration of ceremonial occasions in the village. Thus continuity is maintained by certain *tuhēt* norms, which in turn enforce its members to undertake the different tasks assigned by its *mā-kūō tuhēt*.

Organized group activity is observed in regular economic activities in each *tuhēt*. In response to *mā-kūō tuhēt's* instructions, *tuhēt* members join hands for helping in pooling of nuts, peeling of outer husk, drying of copra on hearth fire, extraction of oil from the thoroughly scraped copra, planting and fencing of new gardens, etc. During this period, the concerned family provides food and other basic requirements to those members who attend the works. This mutual assistance appeared even in post-tsunami relief works during building of relief camps, shelters and arrangement of other basic amenities like water supply, etc., under the active guidance of its *mā-kūō tuhēt*. Each family in a *tuhēt* contributed one member to work in their plantation, carrying rations from jetty to village, clearing of debris in erstwhile affected villages, removing the entangled logs on roads and pathways, clearing of new plot in the forest for habitation, etc. Youth were asked to work in the camp on alternative days to assist the village Council. Apart from contributing man-power, *mā-kūō tuhēts* also contributed coconut, banana and other food resources from their plantations to the Council for temporary management of relief camps.

This organized group activity among kin groups is limited not only to particular *tuhēt* or villages, but all the villages of Car Nicobar. Every *tuhēt* shouldered the responsibility of catering to the subsistence needs of its members whose individual plantations and houses were affected by tsunami. This integration of kin services is being facilitated under the principle of *kūōnkūō* in Car Nicobarese society.

***Kūōnkūō or Tō-ngöönka: (Services rendered to tuhēt)***

In the common parlance of the Car Nicobarese, *kūōnkūō* or *tō-ngöönka* stands for those services rendered to *tuhēt* especially during life cycle and annual festivals of that particular *tuhēt*, wherein lineage members of their traditional *tuhēts*, both intra and inter-villages and Islands as well are those invited, not only take part in *tuhēts* social activity but also contribute in different

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ways. The social norm of '*kūōnkūō*' is operating on this integrative principle of the ramage among the Car Nicobarese.

During community feasts each *tuhēt* member family has an obligation to participate in required economic activities ranging from feeding *tuhēt* pigs to plucking and collecting nuts, processing of coconuts, construction of new houses, clearing of forest patches for horticultural gardening, fishing, hunting, etc. During a marriage ceremony in *Haicho tuhēt* of Kakana village it was observed that a request for necessary assistance to accomplish the task was thoroughly discussed with its *mā-kūō tuhēt* and Council elders. To meet the requirement of the proposed ceremony, members from the *tuhēt* attended the works like collection of fuel wood, scraping of copra and extraction of oil, preparation of pandanus cakes, collection of yams, bananas and tubers from their gardens and processing them, etc. Further the families of other *tuhēts*' also contributed nuts, pork and pandanus to the concerned family.

One natural death was observed in Perka village on 19<sup>th</sup> February 2006 where representatives of all the families attended the burial. Prior to this, all the members assembled at village Church and reiterated their unity under *kūōnkūō*. From this incident it is learned that the concerned family observed mourning for seven days. During this period, the family members of the same *tuhēt* provided the cooked food and drink to the bereaved family. It is discretionary on the part of its *mā-kūō tuhēt* to assign the feeding task to its member families. Apart from this, it was found that whenever the family members fell ill, their nearest kin of such *tuhēt* made courtesy visits and brought along with them some food stuffs and spent time with them.

This kind of internal unity was explicit in the tsunami rehabilitation works in *Roto tuhēt* of Chuckchucha village where relief works had been allocated equally among its *tuhēt* members. Under the supervision of *mā-kūō tuhēt*, the clearing of *tuhēt* plot in new location, construction of temporary houses, plantation as well as gardening works, collection of *ballies* (sticks) and thatch leaves for house building, collection and distribution of relief materials, assistance in making of footpaths, sanitation pits, water supply, attending government and other relief personnel who visit relief camp etc., were undertaken under *kūōnkūō*. Part of the ex-gratia, received as a package of compensation for life and property, was also kept for building a memorial for the victims and its *tuhēt* development.

Such unity among the kin members of a particular *tuhēt* is not only limited to particular *tuhēt* but also between different *tuhēts* of the same village. This kind of inter-lineage solidarity is called *hinēngö panam*. This inter-lineage solidarity is maintained while performing social activities of the village like canoe racing, *kiolo* festivals, etc. The cooperation between *tuhēts* is maintained by the village Council in collaboration with their *mā-kūō tuhēts*.

***Hinēngö Panam or Manūlö Panam: (Village solidarity)***

Similar to *kūōnkūō*, *hinēngō* is also an in-built social mechanism of the Car Nicobarese to facilitate cooperation of different *tuhēts* for initiation of major works in the village. For this, community as a whole is given priority rather than individual lineage groups. The Captain (headman of village Council) organizes the villagers to undertake the tasks under *hinēngō* that range from celebration of *kīōlō* (calendrical festivals), construction of *chanvi* (community hall), *pati yonryio* (birth house) and *pati kapah* (death house), clearing of forest for gardening, canoe-making, and other community related activities.

It is obvious that during a marriage, *kīōlō*, church festivals or any other *tōkirōng sākāmō* (festive occasion), all the *tuhēts* of that particular village contribute coconuts, pork, roots and tubers, pandanus, rice, toddy, and other essential goods to meet the requirements of the concerned feast. For this, heads of *tuhēts* assemble to assess the required materials for the feast and divide them equally among the *tuhēts* of the village. As per the decision of the assembly of *tuhēt'* heads of the village all respective *tuhēts* have to provide cooked food such as yams, pandanus cakes, rice, pork and chicken, etc. Accordingly each *tuhēt* has to procure the required items from their own resources namely *in-linen* (horticultural garden), *nōkō* (pig-sty where at specified places in the forest the pigs are domesticated and fed) for the proposed feast. At the same time women folk too contribute in preparatory works for the feast like scraping of copra, preparation of traditional food, making *chāmam* (mats) and baskets, and other daily chores.

Apart from this, every economic activity i.e., clearing of bushes, sowing of seeds, weeding, and harvest, repairing of fences etc., is undertaken collectively by the villagers under *ngīnōōnka* (oral invitation) or *hinēngō ellōn* (communal unity). For gardening works, all the villagers offer manual service ranging from cutting weeds and plants, to dibbling of saplings, fencing etc. During such services rendered by other lineage members, the host *tuhēt* who have *ngōōna* (invited others to render services) arranges cooked food for them. A well-established *tuhēt* invariably arranges food parcels to them besides the two times meal for the purpose. Thus, in return for the services rendered the host *tuhēt's* work is accomplished in a very short time span with active social networks of the Nicobarese people. The same service is also extended and rendered to other *tuhēts* as and when required.

This collective effort was reflected in the management of human as well as natural resources in the post-tsunami works. People's participation in clearing of debris in old settlement areas, re-plantation in affected gardens, construction of temporary accommodation and so on is noteworthy in the study area. This concept of group solidarity overrides the priority of individual rehabilitation. All the members devoted themselves for rehabilitation of their community and its assets at the first instance. It was seen that soon after tsunami devastation, churches, school buildings, community halls, birth and death houses were built in each village on priority basis rather than individual shelters.

The case of Sawai village reflects this *hinēngō*, where members of different *tuhēts* rendered assistance to Andaman Public Works Department (APWD) in construction of the damaged Passa

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Bridge, which connects Sawai, Tee-top and Aurong villages to Headquarters, by offering manual labour in the wake of scarcity of labourers. Although having little training in fitting iron frames, villagers assisted technicians in the completion of the bridge within a short span of time. In post-tsunami rehabilitation, the youth of the concerned villages shouldered the responsibility of carrying relief material to their new settlement, assistance in admitting seriously injured people in hospital, repair and collection of construction materials from the old settlement, etc. They demanded no wages from civil administration for this work.

Further, this village cooperation is clearly evident from the traditional demolition of *chanvi* in old *el-panam* by community participation in Aurong village. It demonstrates how the whole community was motivated towards adherence to their societal norms even after the tsunami. On 26<sup>th</sup> February 2006 all the members of different *tuhēts* gathered at the Captain's house at Aurong to carry out the earlier decision of demolition of the uprooted erstwhile *chanvi* to collect the articles of ritual significance. The village headman organized the meeting and ordered the villagers to abide by their traditional way of life as it is passing from one generation to another and chalked out the day-long programme. There all the villagers took oath for village unity in rebuilding of their devastated village in a new location soon.

On this occasion, a small pig-fight ritual was arranged in front of the feasting house. Soon after this, pigs were slaughtered and singed for the proposed feast. Another small feast, brought by different *tuhēts*, was also taken to erstwhile Aurong settlement in a procession. On reaching the site of *el-panam*, few elderly persons started applying ritual coconut oil on the forehead and forearms of the participants to ward off evil spirits during the exercise. Later on separate prayer was conducted with the Presbyter of the Church by reading select verses from the Bible and The Book of Common Prayer meant for different occasions as per the Christian Almanac.

Simultaneously, ritual purification of the site in traditional animistic way was also undertaken by five traditional medicine practitioners who went round the *chanvi* three times making noisy incantations while stroking the earth in intervals. After completion of the ritual, they disposed the areca nut twigs in the open sea. During the sorting of ravages, they separated the debris from the entangled cultural artifacts i.e., Chowra-made earthen pots, wooden slaughtering platform, spears and parts of racing canoe, and pooled them at one place. After completion of this day-long ritual, they sacrificed a pig by piercing its abdomen with a pointed chopper precisely between the front and rear legs. The oozing blood of the sacrificial animal was filled in tender coconut cups and sprinkled on the collected objects. The upper jaw of the slaughtered pig was kept in front of the old *chanvi*. The sacrificial animal was singed there itself and consumed by the gathering present. The dual acts of Christianity and animism symbolize the syncretism and illustrates how the traits of the two religions are adapted into the Car Nicobarese social system. After completion of this act, all the villagers returned to the headman's house along with collected materials. The approach road was blocked by keeping wooden logs as tradition demands that each participant take part in the feast at the community house.

There are some other instances that illustrate community participation in tsunami relief works such as clearing the debris, digging sanitation pits and wells, repair and installation of electricity transformers, medical dispensary, community hall, roads and footpaths, supply of relief material from jetty to villages etc. This collective participation invariably reflects a cohesive attitude of the Nicobarese community as a whole.

#### **Cultural Practices towards Collective Effort:**

Max Gluckman (1962) argues that 'ceremony' depicts complex organization of human activity which not only consists technical or recreational part but modes of behaviour that express the nature of relationships and their functions. *Kana-ha-un* (ossuary feast) is no doubt one of the important ceremonial feasts among Car Nicobarese that is celebrated to commemorate all the things their ancestors had established for their *tuhēt*. The day of celebration or holding of the feast is fixed in relation to waxing moon, either during the gibbous or preferably full moon phase. It is celebrated when a village gains the capacity and resources to celebrate it i.e., pigs, yams, coconuts and other fruits and vegetables. On this occasion, every *tuhēt* of the village invites its family *hol* (friends) from other villages. The main attractions of this feast are praising and singing songs composed for the occasion, dancing throughout the night. Pig-fighting in the traditional manner is organized in the morning where each 'lineage pens' are built at one end (the open space annexed) the primary house of *tuhēt*. Dancing is usually held in the *elpināmen*, while singing and carrying of pigs decked with tender coconut leaves, smeared with pig's blood is performed in most of the *elpināmen* of each *tuhēt*. In brief, the social ingredients of holding this grand feast are very elaborate and eye-catching to passionate observers and visitors. It reinforces the village *hinēngō* (cooperation) and encourages them in collective participation. In spite of loss of resources in tsunami, Car Nicobarese still practice these rituals to mark their solidarity and adherence to their traditional system. It is evident from the Kakana village where the said feast was celebrated in a grand manner.

#### ***Kana-ha-un*: (Ossuary Feast)**

Kakana was the first village to perform *Kana-ha-un* by inviting their relatives and *hol* on 15<sup>th</sup> February 2006 keeping in view of necessity the people's cooperation in post- tsunami rehabilitation works. On this occasion the new members of the family were introduced to their traditional friends so that the new ones perpetuate their traditional bonds from one generation to another. As decided earlier by heads of *tuhēts* and the village council, the men folk collectively ventured into the demarcated area to catch pigs prior to the feast along with their invited friends. All the villagers participated in dancing and singing irrespective of age and sex. On the festive day, all the invitees as well as villagers performed prayers at new Kakana Church in the early hours. After breakfast, the participants gathered at an open place where they made pens with jungle *ballies* (sticks) and enclosures made of bamboo to keep the hungry and savage pigs for the act.

There were altogether twenty one pigs kept ready in those pens. A long rope was tied to the hind leg of each pig. The young and middle aged men of Kakana and other villages entered the ground and fought with the wild pigs in the usual manner of teasing the animal and catching

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hold of them by their ears. The released pigs were handed over to their friends who were waiting with big bamboo posts to carry them. Later on all the participants took part in the grand feast where various Nicobarese delicacies were served in *rafoh* (spathes of arecanut commonly used in place of plates) of Nicobarese were served. At the time of departure of the guests, presents like parcels of cooked food and pork and other uncooked stuffs viz. plantains, yams, tubers etc., were given in baskets by the host villagers. This event not only perpetuates traditional relationships but also solicits the cooperation in construction of new houses, repairing and renovation of old hutments, preparation of mats, baskets, fishing canoes, etc. Though the newly built houses on this occasion were meant for accommodation of guests, but after completion of feast they become the property of that particular *tuhēt*.

### **Spirit pacification:**

It is a common belief among the Car Nicobarese that malevolent spirits are responsible for ill health and misfortunes including natural disasters. Hence they appease these spirits by offering nuts and pigs during preparation of plots for horticulture and habitation, plantation of new gardens, fencing, felling of coconut trees, and so on. This sort of ritualism is evident from the pacification ceremony performed in Kinmai village. Phillimon Albert (name changed) has cleared a plot for construction of house and planted dried coconut fronds of about 5 feet in length at several points in the proposed plot. Tender coconuts were fixed to the top ends of these to give them the appearance of human figurines. A pig was slaughtered and its blood smeared to the upper portion of such figurine. It is believed that the spirits may cause unknown illness to their family members if they avoid such practice. Earlier, one of the family members experienced severe fever and it was attributed to the wrath of the spirits. Hence Mr. Albert performed the said ritual act to protect his son from unknown illnesses. Similar kind of practices have been observed at the digging of pond at Chuckchucha village and construction of water reservoir at Sawai village. Such type of spirit pacification is common while initiating any economic or productive work in other villages also. As such the *tōmilūōnō* (witch doctor) is not only perpetuating the traditions but facilitating the acceptance of innovations by appeasing their ancestral spirits.

The ceremonial and economic activities demand more working hands and hence the population strength is maintained by certain institutional mechanisms in Car Nicobar. *Haruk* and *Inlom* are significant in the organization of the Nicobarese society.

### **Haruk: (Customary Adoption of Children)**

The concept of *haruk* is aimed at retaining the intra and inter *tuhēt* relations. It is a common practice that in the event of change of residence by a girl or boy due to marriage, the first-born child of this union has to revert to the *tuhēt* from where they originated. Thus the continuity of *tuhēt* population is maintained by mutual adoption of their children at *tuhēt* and village levels. Soon after childbirth, the head of the family who wants to adopt the child, supplies food, nuts and needed materials for the mother and child as a symbolic act. Continued supply of essential goods makes the rest of the villagers aware that the child is being aimed for adoption. The practices of inter and intra *tuhēt* adoptions have been retained after tsunami. They were instrumental in adoption of orphan children, whose parents died in the tsunami, by the concerned *tuhēts* soon after the tragedy. The existing number of adoptions in Kimious (17), Kakana (20) and Tea-Top (29) is testimony to the continuity of the practice to maintain kin networks across *tuhēt* and village. Not

only the children and men, but *tuhēt* heads also have taken over the responsibility of the single-family members who lost their immediate kith and kin in tsunami and aged people.

### **Inlōm: (Rules of Residence)**

The rule of residence is bi-local among Car Nicobarese and commonly referred as *inlōm* in their parlance. Whether a man or woman comes to live in either of the spouse's house after marriage depends on the requirement of man-power in the family where the groom is supposed to live after marriage. In case a boy loves a girl who belongs to another village or *tuhēt*, and convinces the bride's party of his inclination to stay at her *tuhēt*, the consent of the boy and girl is taken while negotiating the place of residence in the presence of *mā-kūō tuhēt* and the Captain of the village. If it is agreed, the bride's party has to bear the proposed expenditure of marriage including the wedding feast and assign some portion of horticulture land for their subsistence. It is the responsibility of the groom to work for the welfare of his wife's *tuhēt* and he severs ties with his birth *tuhēt* soon after marriage. Many of the able men and women of different *tuhēts* in Kimious, Aurong and Tee-top lost their lives in the tsunami resulting in scarcity of man power. It could be clearly seen in the slow pace of reconstruction of homesteads and plantations. Under the circumstances, some of the able bodied men have been invited to stay in the badly affected *tuhēts* through marriage alliances under *inlōm*.

Apart from this organizational means of social adaptation, Car Nicobarese relied on their traditional skills and knowledge for their survival in the post tsunami crisis.

### **Coping mechanisms:**

The local man power and knowledge was immensely utilized at first instance when all communication with outside world was cut off during the earthquake and tsunami. Soon after tsunami, food and water crisis became acute in Car Nicobar as seawater inundated the residential habitats and fresh water sources. Even supply of rations was affected due to destroyed roads and bridges. All the relief material were brought to the villages as head-loads or by the traditional way of transportation i.e., carrying loads tied to stout bamboo poles on their shoulders. This was the only alternative as roads and vehicles were badly hit. Some villages like Tea-top, Sawai and Aurong were cut off totally for more than four to five months due to collapse of Pāssa bridge, which connects these villages to Headquarter. During that time villagers had no contact with outside world and lived in the forest surviving on wild produce. They were totally dependent on *ha-un* (pork), *kuvöiny* (pandanus), *sampett* (papaya), *ta-nyukngo* (banana), wild tubers like *milahao* or *toki-ni-oh*, *kulalgamu*, *ku-cho-oh*, *kulal*, etc., along with whatever coconuts left inside the forest. Till now water was collected from *tahël* or *törūngōmak* (small streams or stagnant pools) as the wells were filled with sea water.

Since their habitats have been uprooted by giant tidal waves, the Nicobarese shifted to *tāvāt* (inside the forest where they practice shifting horticulture). The selection of new settlement area was entirely their own choice and they built new structures near *lanöören tö mak* (water sources). Soon after the tragedy, temporary houses have been built using the debris of old village as well as the *ballies* (sticks) prepared from the uprooted coconut trees. To tide over the water crisis they also dug wells by using their knowledge at select places and revived their traditional water

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harvesting techniques. To minimize the wastage of water hallowed out bamboos have been fixed horizontally with one end nearer the well and the other end in the containers, so that water poured at one end flowed into the container without spilling.

Some of the *tuhēts* houses in villages like Kimious, Aurong and Lapathi areas were totally submerged and the villagers were temporarily accommodated in neighbouring villages with the consent and concurrence of village and island council. During this time, Kimious villagers were allowed to use, temporarily, resources in the present location as it is mandatory to spare the excess land for plantation and habitat on the request of the neighbouring *tuhēt*. In such cases land is not transferred permanently to the borrowing *tuhēt* or *kinēm*. They can only enjoy usufruct unless there is no rivalry within these *tuhēts*. This sort of adjustment was made possible by the institutional framework of mutual sharing of land and resources.

Material artefacts like outrigger canoes and hunting and fishing implements are functional requisites for survival. Hence, the Nicobarese engaged in collection of cane and other resources for preparation and renovation of their material artifacts. Scarcity of raw material was discussed in the island Council meetings from time to time. Negotiations have already been initiated by the Captains of the affected villages with other village Captains, whose resources were intact, for mutual sharing.

Even now Car Nicobarese rely on *tōhuveū-en* (native medicine-men) for treatment of illness by virtue of their expertise in healing with ritual coconut oil and concoctions of wild herbs. Their role in treatment of tsunami victims is noteworthy since the modern medical facilities were badly affected.

As the existing metalled road was washed away, the old Japanese road that connects all the villages of Car Nicobar was revived. These pathways were of immense use in transportation of all the relief material to the villages in the post-tsunami days.

Even today the Nicobarese follow traditional rules and regulations in maintaining social control and hence co-ordinate different activities among themselves. Being representatives of *tuhēt*, village and Island, *mā-kūō tuhēts'*, and Captains of different villages were liaising between administration and the villagers in post-tsunami relief works. On behalf of their community, the Captain represents the requirements of his villagers in the form of indents to the authorities for obtaining relief material. Once the material were issued, Captains, in the presence of *tuhēt* heads distributed the procured relief materials which were again distributed at *tuhēt* and village level.

Children and adolescent youth engaged in recreational activities like playing traditional sports, dancing and singing in relief camps and hence no tendencies of psychological trauma were found among the Nicobarese. Temporary schools were started in relief camps and the village also with the initiative of educated volunteers.

**Conclusion:**

From the above it can be concluded that kin networks and socio-cultural practices based on the principles of social structure are evolved as an adaptive strategy by the Car Nicobarese in managing post-tsunami situation, helping them to get accustomed to the new ecological conditions in the relocated villages. But, at the same time, they are not totally oblivious of innovations and modern technology for their living. No doubt it was the immediate relief by the administration and the defense personnel that saved many lives of Nicobarese lives. Besides this, many voluntary organizations had also swung into action by supplying first aid medical kits, sanitation material, medicated mosquito nets, rainwater-harvesting equipment, and other hygiene-related materials. No cultural barriers were visible in accepting the modern technology and goods during rehabilitation works. It is evident from the acceptance of the model of *pucca* (permanent) houses, which are to be constructed in Car Nicobar, vegetable cultivation, new occupations like poultry, and cattle rearing, by the Tribal Council, after thorough discussions with the elderly knowledgeable people. However, the consequences of the modern civilization like brewing of illicit liquor, consumption of tobacco along with betel nut, purchase of mobile phones, motor bikes and cars, digital audio and video systems etc are having negative impact on their traditional living. However, in spite of these few instances, all the innovations are accommodated in the cultural framework and became part of the traditional social life.

Thus this article tries to illustrate that traditional human adaptability is made possible by the features of Car Nicobarese social system i.e., *kūōnkūō* or *tō-ngöönka*, *hinëngö panam* or *manūlö panam*, *harūk*, *inlōm* even in unexpected climatic conditions in given environments. Amongst other things, it provides a contemporary adjustment to the modified habitats and surroundings when circumstances demand. They are the practical means of social adaptation rather than physiological and biological and have tremendous influence on the people in spite of contact with outside world.

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