



Rituals: Its Vitality In Socio-Economic Life Of The North-East Indian Tribes With Special Reference To Nocte Tribe Of Arunachal Pradesh.

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ABSTRACT

The study of this subject attempts to make out how the ritualistic life exists among the Nocte tribe. An effort is made to examine the subject with the application of empirical study and method. The study is on historical analysis. A valuable data is gathered through field studies and interaction with the people of the community. Secondary sources are also referred to further authenticate the research work. The Noctes are one of the ethnic groups of Tirap District of Arunachal Pradesh, inhabited in the eastern most part of India. They are the worshipper of animism. The institution of indigenous belief system of the tribe is not organized as such like a permanent place for worship, idol of god so on and so forth. They personified all the natural forces as god or spirits. They believed in the existence of both malevolent and benevolent spirits. Rituals are an integral part of their belief system. Priest acted as intermediate between the gods and the people. They appease these spirits through performing various rituals as recommended by the village priest.

Key words: Ritual, Ethnic, Animism, Spirit, Appease, Priest, Benevolent, Malevolent.

Introduction

Rituals are an integral part of belief system among the Nocte tribe through which they appeased the supernatural being when unfavorable moment befalls in their life. A ritual is performed with symbolic activities in the form of chanting, songs, dance, speaking, gestures so on and so forth. Kottak (2000) defines that “behaviour that is formed, stylized, repetitive, and stereotyped, performed earnestly as a social act;

rituals are held at set time and place and have liturgical order.”¹ The rituals are intricately woven in the fabrics of the Nocte culture and religion, which this belief and practices have been resulted from the mythological and historical circumstances evolved by their forefathers. In fact, rituals are the chief means of communication with all spirits when their prospect of socio-economic life seems jeopardy. In Noctes, ritual is affixed right from the birth to death. Most of them are performed with the help of sacred specialist or a priest. However, in certain cases a layman also performs some rituals which are generally related to individual. Nevertheless, all rituals irrespective of minor or major and individual or community, it is the priest who prescribes them. However, there were rituals which were performed without a priest and sacrifice. Rituals were prominently of two types- community and individual ritual. In the former, all the villagers have to participate by contributing pre-requisite materials as need in it. While the later is observed by a person or family alone. However, both are recommended by the priest.

Since the Noctes were the staunch believer of supernatural beings, they belief that all happenings befall in their life are due to displeasure of spirits. Therefore, in order to appease them they observe ritual with the help of local priest. It is generally believed that all living or non-living object has a spirit. So, they personified some objects viz stone, tree, and stream, and gorge, mountain, animal and so forth as sacred. In fact, disease, illness, accident, dead and so on are believed to be the deeds of evil spirits on the acts of committing mistake by individual. It shows that the Nocte are god fearing tribe.

Dutta states that "the various rituals performed by the Nocte may be dealt with under four main categories, viz. those concerning the life of man; those concerning the physical phenomena; those concerning economic activities; and those concerning social structure.”²

In the past, rituals were the prominent means to treat illness, diseases and to avoid accident. Nonetheless, boon in the economic life also depends upon the good-will of the spirit. There were several rituals practiced by the indigenous Noctes for bumper harvest of crops throughout the year. Apart from these, they performed rituals for community fishing as well as hunting in the villages. Every festival begins with ritual.

Characteristic of ritual: In the Nocte ritualistic frame, eminent characteristics have been throbbled which has bestowed sanctity of its practices. The notable traits of rituals are mentioned below:

- Consultation of priest is imperative in the ritual ceremony;
- Taboo is a part of rituals;

¹. C.P., Kottak, Anthropology the exploration of human Diversity, (Mc Graw Hills Higher Education: 2000, New Delhi), P. 476.

² Dutta, P. C., The Noctes, (Shillong: DIPR, Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh, 1978), P-228.

- Animal sacrifices is an integral part of major rituals;
- Chanting is the chief means of communication with the spirit;
- A minor individual rituals are assigned to perform by priest to anyone of the family member or relative;
- A community rituals are performed by priest alone;
- A local rice beer (Kham) is the prime fabric to appease the spirit;
- Setting of time and place is vital in ritual.

Classification of ritual: It is classified broadly into two important aspects among the Noctes i.e. socio-religious and economic rituals. The main object of performing ritual is to redress or a well-being of the individual or the community as a whole which has been tempted by the evil spirit.

- **Rituals in socio-religious life:** It is deep rooted in the Nocte belief system since time immemorial. Their life begins and ends with ritual which clearly indicates its importance. Some rituals are there which have obliged to every one to perform in one's life like 'Chamkat', (for the boys) and 'Jaanchho Kheh (for the girls)'. Priest holds the highest authority in the sphere of ritualism. Thus, his presence and consultation is more prominent in the society. It is believed that ritual which is not performed in accordance with the advice of priest is ignored by the spirit. Some of the important rituals are discussed below.

Individual rituals

- (a) Na-ming and Na-thet- In the recent past, these two ceremonies were the part and parcel of the traditional Noctes. The former is a naming ceremony of new born baby in which animals like buffalo or pig are sacrificed. For naming ceremony, few villagers are invited for blessing to a newborn baby. In this occasion, broom grass leaf (Taandak) are generally used which are performed by the local priest (popularly known as Taanwa). While in the Nathet ceremony, the ear is pierce with a sharp needle like structure made up of bamboo. It is usually performed by the maternal uncle (Hokapho in Nocte dialect).
- (b) Chamkat and Jaanchho Kheh- Chamkat is a ritual performed for the boys above 10-15 years to recognize him as an able member of village. After this ritual, the boy will be recognized or counted by the society as competent members of the village administration. Chamkat are performed in Paang (dormitory). On the other hand, Janchho-kheh is a ceremony for the girls. In this ritual, the eldest daughters of the village households gathered and will select one household (called Juhum) for the preparation of traditional wine called Kham. Both these rituals are performed during Chalo Loku (Chalo festival). However, this ritual varies from one village to another.

- (c) Khawe Chhup taam- This type of ritual is performed in a minor illness in which a village priest will be consulted for. In such case, he suggests the family to perform ritual by simply offering a piece of betel nutS (Khawe or tamul) and betel leaf (palu) to appease the evil spirit.
- (d) Rangtam- This is one of the prime rituals among the Noctes. This is performed in case of prolong illness. With consultation of village priest, animals like pig or chicken are sacrificed to appease the spirits, which caused harm to a person. Relatives like paternal and maternal uncles are invited to perform and participate in ritual.
- (e) Pajoap- This ritual is performed to treat harebrained in the village. In this ritual, the priest suggests them to let free a white goat in the jungle in the name of the spirit believing that the spirit will take away the cause of suffering.
- (f) Chambanchha- when a child is suffering from ‘ saklok’ (chickenpox, known in the present day), the parents invited village priest in which he suggest them to feed a ball of rice prepared in separate utensil especially for this ritual. Those days they never knew about the disease of chickenpox as known today. They believed that it was due to the caused of evil spirit.
- (g) Chha-piap chhat pean- In the Nocte society, twins’ baby is considered a bad omen as well as ill luck to the family in particular and the society in general. So soon after their birth they are killed. On that day nobody will be allowed to perform their domestic or normal routines like going to field, etc. called Pean.
- (h) Paamchha chhat pean- this ritual is performed when a baby is born to a person having illicit relationship (wedlock). The day is considered restricted and no one on the village is allowed to perform their daily or normal routines.

Community rituals

- (a) Joban Soam/Paankah sak- These rituals are performed annually. These are performed in case of any natural calamities or epidemics and no one is allowed to go and enter in the village for 12-24 hours. The outsiders are restricted entry to the village during this ceremony by constructing gate in various entry points to the village.

In reference to the above ritual, Dutta mentioned in his book “ the Noctes” that on the day previous to the ceremony, all entrances to the village are closed and neighbouring villages are warned not to visit the village. A gate is constructed at the main entrance and pointed spikes are fixed near the gate along the path, in two rows. A small bow with an arrow is hung in the middle of the gate” ³

³ Dutta, Ibid. P-229-230.

- (b) Lojun/Ngamjun- This is a community ritual perform in dormitory before send-off for hunting in the jungle. All the weapons like dao, spears, guns, and bow were smeared with blood of chicken considering for a good fortune. It is performed by the old men of the village.
- (c) Humkhaam Pean- In the village when fire accident takes place, a ritual like ‘ Humkhaam pean’ is performed collectively by the community. The day is observed as restricted in which no villager will do the normal works.

➤ **Rituals in economic activities:** Agriculture is the backbone of their economic life. Shifting is the most eminent cultivation among the Noctes. This cultivation is prominently depends on the nature for its good productions. Modern facilities like irrigation, using of manures, pesticides, etc. are not used in this cultivation. Thus, there are many rituals that are performed for a well-being of their economic life.

- (a) Chharaam/ Song-kakoh- These rituals are preformed after the harvest of crops. In the former, the head of the family smears the containers of grains with a blood of chicken in order to yield bumper harvest in the years to come. The latter is performed by the youngest daughter of the family with distributing pieces of grains to all objects of the household like ladder, grains container, family members, etc.
- (b) Jappuring- This ritual is performed to chasing the rats from the paddy field. In this fact, the village youths perform it with killing rat at the outskirt of the village which is left in the pointed stick. They believed that by seeing the torturing of their fellow, the rest will leave the area for ever.
- (c) Dongthakja- The term ‘ Dongthak’ is derived from two words, ‘ Dong’ meaning pests/insects and ‘ Thak’ means to set fire. Thus this ritual is performed to kill the above mentioned on fire. Here the household families will bring leaf or stem from all kinds of crops along with a bamboo of tube of rice beer and are handed over to the village old men, awaited in the just outskirt of the village putting fire nearby them. This ritual is performed on the first day of harvesting (powija in local dialect).

Rituals are generally prescribed by priest for both individual as well as community. All the major rituals are performed with his assistance in the village. However, there are some rituals which does not required his presence and assistance especially in the individual rituals. Minor rituals like Chambaanchhat, Khaamsitho-taan, Khawechhup taam, etc. are performed by individual family member.

Today the Nocte society is in the state of transition. Outside cultural traits are making rapid inroads into this virgin land. Changes are visible not only in socio-economic and political areas but in religious spectrum. Traditional religious beliefs and practices have been transformed qualitatively.

Gone are days when the Nocte were strictly followed and maintained their rituals. Its practices and relevant has gradually dying out from the society with the influence of many modern elements, viz. education, scientific outlook, advent of modern medicines, development of wider social contacts, penetration of new faiths, and develop means of communication. These altogether have greatly impact in all aspects of their social institutions.

Pandey quotes, “ Change is a social phenomenon. Society cannot remain in isolation in this scientific age. Every culture comes in contact with another culture.” ⁴

It is worthy to mention that with the conversion of the Nocte to Christianity, most of their traditional customs and practices have been averted. For instance, instead of observing ritual in the social activities they have been adopted the customs of the Christianity, i.e. they offer prayer with reading scriptures from the Bible. In addition, with the introduction of missionary’ s schools in the area, the youths are more accustomed with the customs of the Christianity. This spirit reflects when back to their native place or village by disagreeing to uphold certain customs.

The modern education is emphasized on rationality and practicability. With this modern outlook, the new generation is opposed certain irrational practices in the society. Mention may be made that the adoption of twins and deforms baby has been disapproved in the society since time immemorial. In the light of this practice, the elites of the Nocte are now stressed the society to change the attitudes towards the scientific outlook. Apart from these, once the people were depended on local techniques of treatment with local medicines. However, with the availability of modern medicines to their door and influence of scientific evidences on treatment of various ailments inspired the people towards the modern amenities. This paved for the unpopularity of their traditional practices in the present context.

Prior to the independence period, the Nocte remained in isolation. No sign of outside social influence was witnessed. However, their social contacts started when the means of communication was developed in the area. Thereafter, the Nocte often visited even the plain tribes of present Assam for various purposes, like trade, shopping, and as wages labour in Tea garden. Therefore, consequently the social contacts with the outside tribes become wider in course of time, which resulted acculturation. Further, it has opened for new outlook in their social institution. Pandey quotes, “ modernization involves institutional change. In the life of a cultural institution it is a significant element. It regulates patterns of behaviour, which are sanctioned, accepted and widely tolerated in the society. The technological innovations and changes in institutions support each other.” ⁵

⁴ Pandey, Op. cit., p. 4.

⁵ Pandey, Ibid, p. 4.

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