



Custodians Of Tradition: A Study Of Women's Role In Preserving Culture And Tradition In The Nocte Society

Muakhak Tekwa

Guest Faculty, Department of English

Wangcha Rajkumar Govt. College, Deomali, Dist.-Tirap, Arunachal Pradesh

Abstract: The multifaceted roles performed by women in a tribal society adds to the preservation of traditional culture and adds towards sustaining the community's collective memory. Women in a tribal culture represent the link between past and present. They do this by bringing tradition into every aspect of the community's daily life through their service and use of knowledge that has been passed down from their ancestors to create ongoing connections between people living today and those who lived hundreds or thousands of years ago. This study uses qualitative ethnographic approach to understand the role of women as preservers of tradition and custodians of culture. It provides a comprehensive examination of how women's influence permeates the various spheres of communal life, arguing that these sites of daily labour serve as the material foundation for cultural preservation. It presents the contributions of women within the Nocte society as working towards preservation of cultural integrity and thereby, creating a broader discourse on indigenous heritage and gendered agency in North-East India.

Keywords: *Nocte Women, Muktowa Village, Cultural Custodians, Role of women*

1. Introduction

Tribal societies in Northeast India follows chieftainship form of governance that follows severe patriarchy. Men occupy the centre stage of power and control within the community whereas, within such a structure, a woman's status is traditionally derivative, tied to a dominant male rather than personal merit. Yet, women serve as the essential cultural custodians of these societies. Their agency is exercised across the social sphere—through laborious economic contributions in farm production and forest harvesting—and the sacred sphere, where they are called upon for spiritual or vocational roles. Despite being the primary providers and spiritual anchors, their status remains tempered by biological biases, creating a complex landscape where women's vital community agency exists in constant tension with rigid patriarchal norms. The role played by the female gender within the various spheres determines their status (Garg, 195). Women's roles are often limited by the lack of opportunities for social mobility and the dual responsibilities of household and job outside of home (Khandelwal, 619). Their contributions in a chieftaincy community attributes to them multifaceted roles which often go unrecognized or undervalued. Patriarchal cultures view women as inferior to men, and sees their dependence upon men as inherent. This study therefore, aims to offer a fresh perspective on the subordination of women, positioning them not merely as inferior to men, but as vital contributors to the preservation and transmission of tradition.

2. Literature Review

- 2.1) Asma Sayeed in chapter 11 of the book titled *'The Oxford Handbook of Islam and Women'* examines religious learnings of women and the manner in which they transmit that knowledge as direct link to their status within the community (Sayeed, 259). She also viewed women as transmitters of knowledge among the Muslim community from the first generation itself. Drawing on academic sources and manuscripts, Sayeed highlights

women as ‘teachers and students of *hadith* (recorded sayings, actions, approvals, or descriptions of Prophet Muhammad)’⁷. The central concern of her paper was with women’s transmission of ‘religious knowledge’ within the Islamic community. Building on this framework, the present study extends the discussion beyond formal religious instructions to examine how women in the Nocte tribe of Muktowa transmit knowledge not only in ceremonial context but within social spheres as well.

- 2.2) Sokmoly Uon and Kyoko Kusakabe, in their study *Food and Foodway Production of Prahok under Diminishing Fish Resources: Women as Cultural Custodians in Tonle Sap Lake, Cambodia*, employ a qualitative approach to examine how women continue the production of *prahok*—a traditionally fermented fish paste central to Cambodian diets—despite declining fish resources caused by overfishing and environmental factors (Uon and Kusakabe, 359). The authors argue that women’s persistence in producing *prahok*, even in the face of shrinking marine stocks and limited market profitability, reflects an effort to preserve cultural and social identity. The findings reveal that *prahok* making contributes significantly to women’s sense of identity, including their professional and economic roles, as the skill—passed down through generations—sometimes becomes the family’s primary source of income. Their study further demonstrates how the image of a “good” woman is closely linked to food production and preparation practices. Building on this perspective, the present paper seeks to understand how women of Muktowa contribute to the preservation of tradition through their participation in economic and domestic spheres and engaging in other ritual and social practices.
- 2.3) According to Kurtkoti and Joshi, in “*Gendered and Tribal Knowledge Systems: Women’s Role in Preserving Indigenous Knowledge*,” tribal women play a significant role in the preservation and transmission of indigenous knowledge, especially those dealing with the management of natural resources, sustainable livelihood practices, and cultural heritage (Kurtkoti and Joshi, 20-21). This study brings out the gendered nature of indigenous knowledge systems, wherein women are located as primary custodians of medicinal, agricultural, and ritual knowledge. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork among tribal women in Maharashtra, the authors highlight the need for gendered empowerment to salvage indigenous knowledge from loss. The present paper extends this review to examine the role of women in Nocte society as transmitters of tradition and culture, focusing on their participation in social practices and everyday cultural transmission that sustain the Nocte identity.

3. Area of Study

Perched in the eastern heights of Northeast India, Muktowa, is one of the most ancient homes of the Nocte people. It possess a lush biodiversity, one where wild bamboo grove and thriving birdlife meet the terraced crops of millet and root vegetables grown through age-old agricultural traditions. It is inhabited by the *Ku Noctes* or ‘mountain people,’ who speak the Nocte dialect which “is a Tibeto-Burman language, generally spoken in the Tirap district and in some parts of Changlang and Longding districts in Arunachal Pradesh” (Wangno, 37). Noctes of [Muktowa] are the people who believed themselves to have come from a place called *Hukong Huri*—a place somewhere beyond the Patkai Hills and include a diverse group of people who travelled through what is at present called the Lazu village to their present settlement.

4. Overview of the Nocte tribe

Noctes are mainly inhabitants of Tirap district, a few can be found in Longding, and Changlang district under Bordumsa circle and bordering area of Assam near Joypur (Census, 2011). Nocte in particular mean village people as in *Noc=village* and *te=people*. The name reflects their orientation which “can be traced back to the Hukong Valley in Myanmar, from where they migrated to India between the 1670 and 1700” (Bhatt et al., 672). Known for their harmonious social ties, the Nocte community is built upon a network of clans, all of whom trace their lineage back to a singular, shared heritage (Khetey, 823). The Nocte tribe follows the tradition of hereditary chieftaincy and live in thatch houses made of palm leaves (*Licuala Grandis*). The design follows a rectangular shape on raised bamboo pines and the house’s structure like walls

and floors are made of bamboo splits that are interlaced (Dutta, 1978). The practice of jhumming cultivation is seen within the Nocte tribe with their diet changing in accordance with seasonal produce. Historically, the tribe practised headhunting traditions which stopped with the coming of modernity. Inter-village conflicts were frequent within the community and this became one of the primary reasons for the rise of chieftaincy structure (Wangsa, 557-58).

5. Objectives

- To explore women's role in preserving cultural and spiritual traditions in the Nocte community.
- To explore the multifaceted role of Nocte women as cultural custodians in Moktowa Village.
- To analyse how women's participation in various spheres of tribal life of Moktowa village sustains and transmit cultural values within the community.

6. Methodology

This research uses a qualitative study design in examining the role of women as cultural custodians and agents in the social and sacred domains among the Nocte community in Moktowa Village, Tirap District, Arunachal Pradesh. Primary data was collected through a combination of interviews, mainly semi-structured interviews among members of the community to obtain women's experiences, roles, and the social and cultural structures of women's agency. In-depth interviews among the members of the community also provided deeper insight into the ways women are able to carry out their cultural roles and values in both their social and sacred domains. On call interviews were also conducted to reach out members who were unavailable for a face-to-face interview schedule. This mix-source strategy enables a nuanced understanding of women's cultural agency and their role in preserving and transmitting community values.

7. Findings and Discussion

The research underscores that women serve as the keepers of cultural tradition in the studied community through their craft production of traditional alcohol. Alcohol that is brewed from rice or millet, a staple food of the Nocte community, plays a significant role in their social and spiritual life. It is used in rituals and ceremonies including festivals, and as offerings served to deities or spirits of the ancestors in a process called *Rang tam*. Women are not just involved in brewing, but also serving alcohol and therefore play a major part when it comes to keeping these cultural practices intact. They delineate the entire cycle of brewing, starting from preparing the yeast cakes locally known as *Phi* for inoculation and ending with storage and distribution done mainly by women; it is considered inauspicious for men to involve themselves in the process of brewing alcohol. In addition to their role in alcohol production, women undertake significant physical labour both in agricultural and domestic spheres.

7.1) Agriculture and Domestic Sphere

The findings reveal the role of women in preserving traditional method of plantation and ritual practices associated with it within the studied community. The community practices jhumming cultivation techniques, and qualitative data further reveals that the agricultural sphere of the studied community is not only labour-intensive but also deeply gendered and embedded with symbolic meanings that women help sustain.

During the preparatory phase of cultivation, men clear new plots in winter through a process known as *Pik Woat*, while women simultaneously harvest crops from the existing fields for household consumption. Plantation in the studied area begins in January, and during the sowing process, men mix grains into the soil using a *dao* (machete), whereas women gather the resulting debris and burn it, which reflects the complementary division of labour among the community. Women's ritual authority becomes visible during the plantation season as they are the first to plant taro, beginning with planting three seedlings in a triangular shape and offering prayers to the deity locally referred to as '*Joban*', to bless the harvest. Using twig from the bayberry tree known as *Jon-kang*, women till the soil and plant the taro seedlings, transcribing their role as mediators between the land and the spiritual realm. On the same day, men construct protective fences—known as *Wak Pan Man* (pig and cow fence)—to safeguard crops from domestic animals. This further proves the vital role that women play in food plantation and rituals pertaining to harvest within the Nocte community. Their participation extends beyond physical labour to preservation of ritual knowledge which reflects their profound connection with the land and the spiritual realm.

The study found that women were responsible for selecting taro saplings, transporting them from old fields to new plots, and preparing millet for sowing. This shows their expertise in crop management and seed preservation which as a matter of fact is not incidental as it is culturally transmitted knowledge which is central to the continuity of traditional farming practices of the studied region. It was also found that women undertook majority of fieldwork throughout the agricultural cycle, including regular weeding and other maintenance activities. Women within the studied community carry firewood from the fields in finely woven bamboo baskets called *Sunggak* and fetch water in bamboo tubes for the preparation of post-fieldwork meals. These practices position them not only as caregivers but also as essential economic providers within the household.

The study found women to manage post-harvest activities as well—particularly, during the millet harvesting season from June to July—as plucking of millet tips during harvest, referred to as *Hami-Thik*, to be solely performed by women. It was found that the supervision of the storage and assessment of availability or scarcity of food was conducted by the senior-most female which emphasizes women's authority in food security management. Their responsibilities extend beyond their role as agricultural workers to include domestic duties like child nursing/rearing, and food preparation which are considered culturally to be female work. The information reviewed above demonstrates women in the Nocte community as economically productive and guardians of spiritual knowledge highlighting their role as essential in sustaining cultural continuity and spiritual connections with the land.

7.2) Cultural Sphere

The study found honour and identity as central to the tribe's cultural values. One method to showcase the laurels earned by men is the tattooing ritual. The Nocte tribe practised head-hunting tradition (now discontinued), and those who earned merit in warfare were given tattoos to symbolise and represent their achievement—for the eldest son on their face and the younger on their chest. Women too inscribed ink on their skin but for them it was seen as a cultural mark of transitioning into adulthood. In both the cases it was observed that a female referred to as *Maknyu* (a person with skill) would carry out the tattooing process. Her status within the Nocte community is highly recognised as she possess the technical skills needed in performing the inscription and the ritual that follows. She is invited by the family of the individual who is supposed to get the tattoo and is also served food and drinks as part of ritual reciprocity. The study found that in addition to technical expertise, she is also considered to be a ritual expert who assures the transmission and dissemination of tradition in a proper manner. Thus, we can understand that women in Nocte society act as keeper of cultural tradition and this positions them as key preservers of indigenous tradition and spiritual values.

Subsequently, it was found that women created pottery within the studied community and the *Maknyu* played an important role in transmission of cultural knowledge pertaining to the skills needed in this field. In addition to ceremonial duties, she also performs crafting within the community and furthermore, she passes that skill and indigenous knowledge on to the next generation through oral tradition/practice. This reinforces women's role in preserving artistic creation and maintaining material culture. Thus, the role of women within the Nocte tribe can be understood as multifaceted as they aid in maintaining cultural memory through their work as ritual practitioners, as teachers, and keeper of the community's cultural and spiritual memory.

The study illustrates women involvement within the ritual and artistic space of the Nocte tribe and how their participation in dissemination of knowledge and skill adds to cultural values that are passed down and maintained in the studied area.

7.3) Social Sphere and Childbirth

The role of women in the studied area is intricately affected by their marital status. Woman married to a strong warrior or the chief was regarded in a high esteem. Identity of a female in Nocte society is proportional to the man she is betrothed. It was also found that unmarried women after the age of 40 held no status within the community. Fertility was another aspect that affected their status—just like how women in Santal, Munda, and Ho societies who were barren, for example, faced exploitation and marginalization (Bhattacharya et al., 4). The studied community follows primogeniture tradition and as such women possess no right to property. At the time of marriage, the bride's family presented her with three types of bamboo baskets: a tightly woven *Ding*, a loosely woven *Boan*, and a small decorative one called *Ding-khi*. In addition, she receives a two-foot-tall cylindrical basket with a lid, known as a *khock*, to hold her belongings—such as

a necklace (*Lik*) and earrings (*Di-lu*). A decorated iron stick called *Janmanthun* was also bestowed upon her. Women's social identity within the studied community is found to be embedded within patriarchal structures.

Furthermore, the study observes childbirth in Muktowa Village to be accompanied by elaborate ritual practices, which demonstrate women's authority within the social and spiritual domains. During childbirth, a ritual known as *Bichi-Chamlak* is performed, in which female midwives wash the newborn and participate in a ritual feast consisting solely of rice, called *Simoi-Cham*. The study shows that women play a vital role in ceremonies related to childbirth. They oversee the whole process of food preparation, closely observing the foam produced while cooking—as foam overflowing during preparation is interpreted as an ominous sign, foretelling that the child would have foam forming in his/her mouth. Such practice makes women interpreters of symbolic signs and guardians of ritual correctness. One practice observed at the time of birth was that the oldest woman within the household would wash the infant's face using water poured out of a lead (*Nyab Ruh*) and deliver a prophecy regarding the child's future. She would predict the child's future—if a boy, to be successful in hunting, and if a girl, to be fertile and give birth to strong sons. This prophetic role reinforces spiritual authority vested in senior women and positions them as mediators between destiny, ancestry, and social continuity.

7.4) Ceremonial sphere,

The study reveals the daily life and social practice within the studied community to have a strong connection with their spiritual beliefs. The Noctes belief that ancestral spirit continue to influence and guide the living due to which spiritual rituals play a key role in maintain ceremonial tradition of the tribe. The research shows that a spiritual doctor referred to as *Mong* occupies an important place in their faith by acting as a catalyst to allow connection between the living and the spirits. The *Mong* is therefore not only a healer but also a protector of cultural traditions and spiritual knowledge.

The research further found an important ritual referred to as *Mong-Boah*, which is a ceremonial dance done by a female referred to as *Mong-Nyu*. "*Nyu*" in Nocte refers to woman and "*boah*" means dance. It is believed that during the performance of the *Mong-Boah* ritual, a spirit would come and reside within the body of the *Mong-Nyu*, and then she would speak in the voice of the spirit, allowing communication between both realms. An individual who wishes to talk with their deceased family members would invite the *Mong-Nyu* to perform the ritual for them and begin to prepare the rice beer and other ingredients that are required for the ritual (the preparation would take two to three days). This reinforces the significant role of women within the Nocte culture and beliefs. The *Mong-Nyu* performs the dance as part of spiritual events and connects the living to the spirit realm. Overall, the data indicates that women are deeply involved in preserving traditions and spiritual beliefs/practices in the communities studied, thus demonstrating their responsibility within the tribal society. The role of the *Mong-Nyu* highlights the importance of women in protecting and passing down traditional beliefs and cultural identity to future generations and highlights their role in preserving and transmitting the spiritual culture of the Nocte community.

8. Conclusion

This paper highlights the important role that women play in maintaining and passing down cultural and spiritual traditions in the Nocte community of Muktowa village. The findings of this research reveal that women in the above-mentioned community play an important role as custodians of indigenous knowledge by actively taking part in various aspects of tribal life. Their role can be identified in different aspects, and their contribution to society is not limited to one aspect but also includes the preservation of culture and tradition. The diverse role that women play in tribal society helps in the survival and maintenance of traditions and culture. The active role that women play in different aspects ensures the survival and passing down of traditions, making them important contributors to the identity of the Nocte community. The study therefore emphasises the need for greater recognition of women's role in indigenous society and posits the necessity to safeguard their knowledge, skills and cultural authority.

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