



To Or Not To: The Dilemma Of Traditional Ceremony

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Abstract: Arunachal Pradesh is home to diverse indigenous communities, among which the Idu Mishmi tribe of Dibang Valley and Lower Dibang Valley celebrates the Reh festival as its most significant socio-religious event. This ethnographic study examines the Reh festival through oral consultations with community elders and key informants. The research explores its origin and various stages in the celebration, its cultural and spiritual importance, preparatory offerings, priest-led chants and dances, community feasts. The Igu (shaman/priest) emerges as the central figure, guiding invocations, performing divinations, and ensuring ritual purity throughout the multi-day celebration. Findings highlight how Reh faces various contemporary challenges, increasing animal sacrifice, economic burdens of hosting, and potential dilution of traditional practices due to modernisation and less number of people taking up the profession of igu. This work underscores the need to document and support such intangible cultural heritage for preservation.

Keywords: Idu Mishmi, Reh, Igu, Aa-gite, Aa-meta

Introduction

The diversity of India is well spoken of topic. The rich diversity is also reflected in the small State of Arunachal Pradesh also. Having a diverse culture of around twenty seven major tribes and many a number of sub-tribes within, is a rich show of diversity. Of such a many tribes Idu Mishmi is a celebrated tribe. The tribe is well known for variety of traditionally charming practices.

Reh is one of the festivals that is a part of their charismatic practices. It reflects the societies reliance on the products obtained by them from the nature, and is also a show of social bonding and a call for the prosperity of the family. It essentially involves a feast for five complete days. Herein, during the festival, rituals, animal sacrifices and chants are marked with the participation of the community. The present paper endeavours to deal with the intricacies surrounding the celebration, their drawbacks and positive sides.

The endeavour

The purpose of the present paper is to try to get a glimpse into the intricacies surrounding the Reh celebration. For the said purpose, the scholar has met the senior members of the society. Thus, the paper is empirical in those aspects, while also having the qualitative aspects in the sense that certain nuances have already been investigated and reported by the other researchers. Meanwhile, the sampling is purposive sampling.

The paper will help to understand the society and its celebrations better. The main objective of the paper is to explore the philosophy, ritual practices, social significance and contemporary relevance of the Reh festival. Hence, the paper tries to understand the society from the perspective of the festival in detail for its contemporary relevance.

The Idu Mishmi Tribe: An Overview

Occupying the vast majority of the Lower and Upper Dibang Valley is the Idu Mishmi's of Arunachal Pradesh. The tribe is well-known across the country for its diverse and unique way of life. The tribe mainly practices shifting cultivation accompanied with hunting and fishing. Heavy reliance therefore is on the forest produce. However, as of late the tribe has shifted from the reliance over the agriculture to other sectors and business.

The social structure of the tribe is very closely intertwined and clan based. The practice of Anna practice binds the society into one closely knit family. The said system binds the society into one both from the maternal and paternal sides. And therefore, when the occasions call for, the anna's from the both side gather to the family event.

Origin and stages of Reh

Reh signifies among the society the sign of prosperity and protection from the evils, appeasement of supernatural forces and celebration of good health. It is a call to the family members of the Reh-heta, (head of the ceremonial event) to celebrate the oneness of the family. The celebration goes for the search of Aduu (sister's children), embo (Paternal-Maternal family) and bestows upon them a huge show of respect.

The first day is for the gathering of the families of the reh-heta and to bring on celebratory mood. The host and the villagers on the arrival of guest shout Mraibo (guest has arrived) and thus announce the arrival of the guest, and the host get ready to serve them with delicacies.

As a symbol of respect, the Reh-heta searches for near and dear ones on the occasion. When the attendees reach, the female attendees can pay Aa-gitay (Amounts paid with love to the host) and in return the host Reh-heta gives them Aa-meta (exchange). Meanwhile, embo (Paternal-Maternal family) is given A-meta (Rupee) and elithrungu (Pork ribs) on eya-li (second day). The Aduu-aa (sisters children) are given on en-li (third day), sha-ekrua (Mithun Head) and eli-ekrua (Pig Head) as a symbol of respect, which they feast upon in group, recalling and rejoicing their past memories.

On the fourth day, awru (villagers of the reh-heta) eba (clan from the same title) are provided with the feast, together.

Role of the Igu (Priest)

Igu is the most important figure for almost every ceremony. He is the one who leads in the ceremonies. He is the one ordained with the duty to perform the long ritual chants that have been passed down orally through the various gone by generations. The function does not begin in formality until the arrival of priest. Even in the Reh, the priest is the one with most important function and a Herculean one. He performs the rituals for five long days. And there is not much time allotted to him for rest. It is gruesome and restless patience of workout through the day.

The priest is selected by the reh-heta (person organising Reh) during igu-chi. Once the igu agrees to perform the rituals, he often would refuse to take on other ceremonial performances. On his arrival, igu is accompanied by ta-mro (igu helper). They help igu to carry garambo (tabla like instrument) Yipu (main instrument) Amrala (igu garments).

On the ceremonial day he'll begin with the performance of tou-thro (planting tiny bamboo plant to the entry and inside of the House). Igu (Priest) then performs lawo-tiwuba (starting ceremonial chants) on the first day. Second day continues with igu performing Sha-cha (where to place the Mithuns).

Third day igu performs lopili-thru (historical account of how society and reh came). On the fourth day igu performs Ayu-na (Pig and Mithun sacrificial day for the prosperity of the awru-eba). On the fifth day Manu-chay (ending chants) are made by the igu.

Thus, the sacred chants during the Reh festival narrates the historical accounts and chants for the prosperity and well-being of the family. Thus, the chants made by the igu are in form of narrations of the past. Thus, in absence of written documents, the oral chantings are the means of passing on the history and philosophy of the society.

Offerings and Sacrifices

Sacrifices are also made in the name of spirit. However, traditionally, the sacrifice is of the animals such as Mithun and Pig amongst others. The animals are then feasted upon by the people attending the event.

In the event, Yu (rice beer) and Anu-nu (local dish) is one of the local delicacy served to the attendees. Tathu (Raw Meat) is provided to the attendees when leaving. Apart from that they can also have athapi (lunch and dinner), with prepared meals. As of today, the modern beverages also have become an important aspect of servings.

Reh Festival in Contemporary Times

With the advent of the modernity the festivals have also undergone substantial change. There are challenges that have arisen with the growing globalisation and economic dependence of the global village.

One of the primary challenges is the economic disparity. Today the amount of the sacrificial animals have also increased significantly. Mithun and Pigs which are the predominant players during the rituals are not easily payable due to their exorbitant prices. This animals are sacrificed in each day's of the five day ritual. And therefore, without Mithun and Pig, it would be difficult to conclude the festival.

Furthermore, Aa-sango (Jungle Rat), Aa-dango (Squirrel) and Aa-so (Porcupine) which were earlier provided as Aa-meta, which is exchange return of aa-gite has now become rare and almost difficult

to hunt. However, in-lieu of the said animals, the Reh-heta has the option to deliver the other sacrificial animals meat as per the desire and availability.

The other difficulty with the Reh is that with the advent of the modernity, the traditional priestly knowledge is being lost. Since the ceremonial event is of five days, there is huge toll upon the Igu. And as a result, not many igu's have knowledge of the narrations of all the five days. And since most of the new generation people are into the modern professions, the desire and availability of the people wanting to practice the profession of igu is scarce.

Further, Aan-da (Investment in cash or kind done by other prospective ceremonial heads) also needs to be returned in the future. But, in future, such amounts would be economically inviable as because of inflation. If Aan-da is delivered in kind, then the same kind and of the same weight or above it, has to be delivered back to the prospective Reh-heta, whenever they organise their own private Reh. And such ceremonies may be conducted immediately or after prolonged time. And thus, the investment in kind may have increased in price by huge margin.

Mismanagement of resources due to over-surplus supply is the other drawback with the Reh ceremonies. As there is no information as to how many people are going to turn up for the ceremony, the sacrifices has to be made in anticipation of a margin. The Reh-heta always intends to sacrifice the requisite numbers of animals, as it is also a matter of prestige for him as there ought not to be scarcity of the feast when the people turn up in huge volume.

Conclusion

In an era when there is huge increase of modernity and globalisation, the toll of organising reh is also a heavy burden economically. Although it might increase the prestige, it may leave behind a huge task for the reh-heta. In case of his demise, the burden will have to be shared by his family members.

The sacrificial animals being in few numbers is another cause of concern. Further, the situation is made complicated by the advent of new laws prohibiting the slaughter of the animals. The ceremony also places a huge risk into the extinction of the animals that are slaughtered in the events.

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