

Guardians of Tradition: The Vital Role of Ochai (Shaman) in Preserving Ancient Wisdom

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Abstract

This paper analyses the role and importance of Ochai (Shaman) in the daily life of the commoners, particularly of the Jamatia tribe, the word ‘Ochai’ is a Kokborokⁱ term meaning ‘Shaman’. Shamanism is not confined to a single country or region. It is a widespread phenomenon, existing in various forms across the globe. For instance, in the forests of the Amazon, indigenous tribes have their own shamans, known as “curanderos” in Spanish, who use plant medicines like ayahuasca to heal and connect with the spiritual realm. In Africa, the Sangoma and Inyanga of South Africa’s Zulu culture serve as spiritual healers and divinersⁱⁱ. Similarly, in remote villages in Indonesia, shamans known as “Dukun” use their unique blend of animism and mysticism to guide their communitiesⁱⁱⁱ. The Shaman known as Ochai in the Jamatia tribe is the High Priest of the community, a mediator between the gods and the devotees. A man who performs miracles by chanting mantras and offerings which can only be explained logically because the cure does happen. Ochai is also revered as the bringer of godly peace and blessings, any rituals, festivals, pujas, or social gatherings, including childbirth and marriage, are incomplete without his blessing. There are times when huge debates occur between practitioners of modern medicine and those who live in remote villages as Ochai with his knowledge in traditional medicines is capable of curing broken limbs which the patient had been advised to have amputated.

Introduction

Among the 18 Indigenous Tribe (as a whole known as Tripuri) of Tripura, Jamatia is the third largest Tribe with approximately 1 lakh in number. The word Jamatia is a combination of two words “Jama” and “twiya” meaning “Tax” and “Does not bear the burden of paying tax”. The reason Jamatia tribe being exempted from paying Tax is because they formed the core of the Royal Army during the days of the Kings of Tripura or known as the fighting tribe. The tribe’s world is filled with religious ceremonies, rituals, rites folktales and folklore. And the Tribe would be incomplete without even one of these, however, to save guard such tradition there exists a highly respected man in the tribe known as Ochai and he is no exception. Ochai holds a great significance and responsibility within the community. Traditionally, the Ochai served as a healer and spiritual guide for the tribe. They were believed to have a special connection with the spiritual realm and possessed the ability to communicate with spirits and deities. The Ochai played a crucial role in understanding and interpreting natural and social phenomena that affected the tribe. They were considered to be the mediators between humans and other beings, including animals and spirits. They would enter a shamanic state on behalf of the tribe and interpret the phenomenological content of that state for the benefit of the tribe. This involved identifying and addressing issues such as illness, conflicts, or any disturbances in the spiritual and social balance of the community.

The Ochai would often enter a trance state during these rituals, allowing them to communicate with animal spirits and deities. This trance state was sometimes accompanied by a physical transformation, where the Ochai would do animal-inspired costumes to symbolize their connection with the animal spirits. The Ochai's role also extended to providing guidance and counseling in various aspects of life.

This paper will highlight some of the Mantras used during the ritual ceremonies of the jamatia tribe including the symbolic names or in other words “The language of the Ochai” of the animals and witches used by Ochai.

3. Literature Review on Tripuri Shamanism (18 indigenous Tribes of Tripura as a whole is known as Tripuri).

In the book “Journey into the Spirit World: Exploring Tripuri Shamanism” by Tripura Dasgupta, a comprehensive exploration of Tripuri shamanism and its cultural significance is presented. Drawing on a wide range of sources and research, Dasgupta explores into the traditions and practices that shape the Tripuri people's understanding of the spiritual realm. Dasgupta unravels the complex and profound nature of this ancient religious practice. She highlights the central role of the shaman, who acts as a mediator between the human and spirit worlds. The book highlights the concept of journeying, where the shaman navigates both the Upper and Lower Worlds. During these journeys, the shaman may encounter anthropomorphic and animalistic spirit guides that provide assistance and guidance.

Furthermore, Dasgupta investigates the origins of Tripuri Shamanism and its relationship with nature worship. According to Eliade's key characteristics of shamanism, as mentioned in “Perspectives on Shamanism”, the Tripuri shaman can be seen as a “soul traveller” who travels to the spirit world via the axis mundi. The term “axis mundi” derives from Latin and translates to “axis of the world” or “center of the world”. It is a symbolic representation of the cosmic order and serves as a focal point for spiritual and cultural significance. Dasgupta also addresses the controversy surrounding the term “shamanism” and its generalization. She acknowledges the debates among scholars about the difficulty of arriving at a universal definition of shamanism due to its historical and cultural variants. However, she argues that Eliade's key characteristics provide a starting point for understanding Tripuri Shamanism and its significance.

“The book also explores the social and cultural functions of Tripuri Shamanism. It examines how this spiritual practice serves not only as therapy for individuals but also as an integral part of religious cosmology and practice within the Tripuri community. Through ritual practices, participants are able to alter their state of consciousness and perceive the spirit world”.

(Parncutt, 2019)

Dasgupta's book sheds light on the rituals and ceremonies associated with Tripuri Shamanism, highlighting their importance in maintaining social cohesion and harmony within the Tripuri community. These rituals are not simply individual acts of personal spirituality, but rather collective experiences that strengthen the social bonds and sense of community among the Tripuri people. In examining Tripuri Shamanism, Dasgupta brings attention to the tension between particular and universal traits and characteristics that exist within the study and practice of shamanism.

Drawing upon the works of Mircea Eliade and the cross-cultural patterns he identified, Dasgupta highlights the importance of understanding shamanism in its specific cultural and historical contexts. She argues that the practices and beliefs of Tripuri Shamanism are deeply rooted in the Tripuri cultural

cosmology and cannot be detached from their unique socio-historical context. Dasgupta's findings challenge the notion that shamanism is a universal phenomenon that transcends cultural boundaries.

4. Mantra (Sacred Chants) used by Ochai during Lampra Puja.

Lampra Puja is a traditional ritual of cleansing. The most important of the rituals, it is necessary to performed this ritual before any social occasion or puja ceremony. During the collection of the data the High Priest of the Jamatia Tribe, Late. Sujan Kumar Jamatia particularly of Jampuijala area was reluctant to share the Mantra. It was only after time and again gentle persuasion and humble request with the permission of Hoda Okra (Chieftain of the Jamatia tribe), that the Mantra was given for transcription. Before the start of the Lampra Puja, Ochai is invited two days in advance to perform the ritual as he requires fasting, starting from the evening at 6 P.m. until the ritual gets over the next day approximately around noon. Below is the Mantra used during Lampra puja.

Ang hingya doh Sri Akhatha, Sri Bikhatha
Ama Twibuk, Ama Songram
Niroksi maphainai
Uttor tongbw, Dokhin Tongbw
Puu-be tongbw, Paschim tongbw
Rajsinghason rokha, Achok phaidi
Aa Takle achok phaibaijakhaha
Nirokno Chaswmai rokha
Nung swmai rojakha
Yasujaknai twi rojakha, Yasubaijasidi

(Twi kisa kisa ha o lowi yasu rokha)

Aa takle yasubaijakhaha
Nwsa Fona (bwmwng) kwrwija twtwi phanw
Bikhra khangra Japhanw
Nirokno khulusaja wani bangwi
Nirokno suri sajawani bangwi
Chukjaya twtwiphanw
Nirokno mairung kisa rambofol kisa
Batasa kisa khwlaiwi jugalwi
Chasmai rojajawu
Aa thokwu thokya phanw
Chaja baikha
Aa takle chabaijakha nungbaijakha
Yasu baijasidi
Bukhuk subaijasidi Aa takle yasubaijakhaha
Bukhuk subaijakhaha Swraphale lengla langbai jadi

(Posa chasmai roroni tei boni nok borokrokni hamari naiwi mwtai roknithani ochaini konokmwng teisamwng)

Doh o donda kwrwi dosa kwrwi

Ayakwrwi achi kwrwi

Kungtwi kwrwi mwktwi kwrwi

Hener kwrwi sakron kwrwi

Akhaksa kwrwi kharsa kwrwi

Kulun kwrwi kwma kwrwi

Rajdanda kwrwi debananda kwrwi

Khwlaiwi tongro jadi hwnwi

Kobokjani bangwi

Nwsa Fonani (bwmwng) bangwi

(Twi kisa lota baikhe ha o luwi tei waisa mwtaimo haihai sanphimani)

Doh aa takle nwsa Fonani (name) bangwi

Aayuk tobokha thaluk tobokha

Don tobokha Jan tobokha

Maibw toh bokha khulbw tobokha

Doh nwsa fona no kosong khunhchwrwi lokhwrwi

Rimwng Siniya rophaiwi

Chamwng siniya charowi

Ayuk bare thaluk bare

Don bare jan bare

Ayuk kwchwng thaluk kwchwng

Jolo jolo mol mol khwlaiwi

Tinini siming tongro jadi dok baba

(Mairung agongwi sema nailaha/thikana nailaha)

Aa takle chabaikha nungbaikha

Hamaribw robaikha

Tei tubw leila baikha ba

Je nirok thangwa muchuk thani thangbaijasidi

(Twi kisa kisa luwi mwtai rokno bidai khaiwu)

English Translation

It is impossible for me to come walking

Siri Akhatha, Siri Bikhata^{iv}

Goddess Twibuk, Goddess Songram^v

So please appear

Be in the East, West, North or South

Seat fit for the kings have been arranged

Please take a seat

Now that you all are seated

That food has been offered

That drinks have been offered
The water to wash the hands has been offered

(The Ochai pours a drop of water on the ground three times in a row indicating gods are washing their hands).

Now that the hands are clean
Your son (name of the house owner)
Though Poor with nothing to offer
Bow down and prays
And makes an offering of Rambofol and a few grains of rice
A bit of Batasa as refreshment
A humble refreshment with nothing else to offer
Now that the refreshment is over
Please wash your hands and your lips
So that a little rest can be taken

(Now the Ochai, after the offering made to gods recite the mantra once again asking them to bless the family)

Let no harm come upon them
Let no pain come upon them
Let there be no tears
Let there be no physical
Let their physic be in good health
Let there be no cold and cough
Let there be no pain and sickness
Let there be no Rajdandho and Debdomdho
Please make sure that they are safe
A humble request for your son (his name) and his family.

(The Ochai now pours a drop of water on the ground and gain recites the mantras)

Now that you have blessed your son (his name)
With prosperous and healthy life
With richness and long life
With abundant grain of rice
With a house that no cyclone can break
With clothes never seen before
With food never seen before
With unending richness
With longevity in life
With shinning life
And with overflow of paddy
From today let all this blessing be upon him

(The Ochai takes a few pieces of rice grains and then looks at it by placing it on his palm, finding the result known as sema of the ritual)

And then Ochai recites the mantra again.
Now that the serving of the Prasat is over
Now that the food and the drinks are over
Now that the blessing has been given
I pray to all the gods
That please return back to your place
Or to the place you wish.
So please appear
Be in the East, West, North or South
Seat fit for the kings have been arranged
Please take a seat
Now that you all are seated
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That drinks have been offered
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Now that the food and the drinks are over

Now that the blessing has been given

I pray to all the gods

Please return back to your place

Or to the place you wish.

(Collected and trans: Mine)

5. Commentary:

"It is impossible for me to come walking / Siri Akhatha, Siri Bikhata / Goddess Twibuk, Goddess Songram...": Through this phrase, Ochai is calling upon the various deities to come and bless the ritual honored in their names. The Ochai, not knowing about the whereabouts of the gods says that he can't come walking to them or to find them. The Ochai invokes their presence to guide and assist in the rituals being performed.

"Be in the East, West, North or South...": This could be an allusion to the omnipresence of the called deities, or a call for their attention from all over directions.

"Seat fit for the kings have been arranged / Please take a seat Now that you all are seated...": This suggests respect has been given, a place of honour had been prepared for the deities, and that they are considered present in the ceremonial proceedings.

"That food has been offered / That drinks have been offered...": These are traditional offerings in many religious practices symbolizing respect, honour, and appeasement to the deities.

"The water to wash the hands has been offered...": This refers to a ritual purification process, where the deities are symbolically being offered to cleanse themselves before partaking in the offerings.

"Your son (name of the house owner) / Though Poor with nothing to offer...": This sentence emphasizes the humility and the simplicity of the offerings made, indicating that even though the host is not rich in material possessions, he is devoted and respectful.

"And makes an offering of Rambofol and a few grains of rice...": Rambofol is a symbolic name of banana Ochai' words, meaning the fruits of Ram. These simple offerings again highlight the modesty and the humility of the host.

"A bit of Batasa as refreshment...": Batasa is a traditional sweet offering, it symbolizes the sweetening of relationships and a token of respect and warmth.

"Please wash your hands and your lips / So that a little rest can be taken...": This represents the conclusion of the first part of the ceremony and preparing for a break.

"Let no harm come upon them...": This part is a prayer for the well-being and safety of the people in the household.

The second paragraph continues with blessings and best wishes for the host's family, emphasizing abundant prosperity, safety, health and long life.

"Now that the serving of the Prasat is over...": Prasat refers to the serving of ceremonial food and drinks. This phrase signifies the conclusion of this part of the ritual.

"I pray to all the gods/That please return back to your place/ Or to the place you wish...": This phrase signifies the end of the ceremony. The Ochai is respectfully requesting the deities to return to their original places now that the ritual has ended, while also giving them the option to go wherever else they wish. This ensures that the gods have free will and are not bound or controlled, as is respectful in many religious practices.

Overall, the mantra used by Ochai contains various elements of ritualistic procedures including the invocation of deities, the offering of humble gifts, prayers and blessings for well-being and prosperity, and finally the respectful farewell of the invoked deities. This ceremony signifies reverence towards spirituality and a deep sense of connection between the human realm and the divine.

6. Findings:

1. The text presents a ritual that involves the invocation of various deities.
2. The ritual places importance on respect and humility, evident from the preparation of seats for deities, the reference to the host as poor, and the humble offerings made.
3. Traditional offerings of food and drinks, grains of rice, and batasas are given, highlighting the cultural importance of such items in this ritual scenario.
4. The ritual includes a cleansing process, symbolized by the offering of water for washing hands. This can be interpreted as a form of purification.
5. There is a consistent urge to seek blessings for well-being and protection from harm, illness, and misfortune. This is reflected in the repeated prayers and blessings throughout the ritual.
6. The ritual concludes with a respectful request to the gods to return to their respective places, indicating the conclusion of the ceremony.
7. The text provides valuable insights into specific cultural or religious practices, with a focus on the interaction between the human and the divine realm.

7. Symbolic names used by Ochai (Language of the Ochai).

<u>Name of Animals and Birds</u>	<u>Ochai's Dialect</u>	<u>Kokborok</u>
1. Buffalo	Jolomosok Kuma Raja ^{vi}	Misil
2. Pigeon	Uru Pakhi Raja	Faruk
3. Pig	Surobi ^{vii}	Wok

4. He goat	Anobw Raja	Pujuwa
5. Sheep	Birsing Raja	Mera
6. Duck	Bolikhung Raja	Takhum
7. Chicken	Onopokhi Raja	Tok
8. Witch	Hemamali	Bwrwirok

8. Methods and methodology used in the research.

1. Ethnographic Study: Live observations, spending time within the community to experience, observe, and record their practices.
2. Interviews: one-on-one discussions with Ochai and community members.
3. Transcriptions: Documenting spoken words, rituals, and sacred chants into written form.
4. Literature Review: A study into secondary data, exploring other papers, books, and records related to the topic.
5. Analysis of Cultural Artifacts: A study and analysis of symbols, offerings and other physical objects related to rituals.
6. Case Study: Study on specific communities (Jamatia Tribe).
7. Content Analysis: Analyzing written texts, oral traditions, and other forms of cultural expressions to identify specific elements of ancient wisdom that are preserved and transmitted through the practices of Ochai.

9. Conclusion:

The paper explores the ritualistic practices of Ochai underlining its significance in preserving ancient wisdom. Through a detailed depiction of a specific ritual, it unveils how the Ochai establishes a deep sense of connection between the human and divine realms. Throughout the ceremony, various elements such as the invocation of deities, humble offerings, blessings for well-being, and the respectful farewell of deities are present. The sense of respect and humility is pervasive, as evidenced by the modest offerings and the respectful language used towards the deities. Besides the spiritual significance, the ceremony also provides a cultural framework, signified through traditional offerings and symbolic actions. Moreover, the paper dives into the language of the Ochai, providing a deeper understanding of its dialect and its unique translation of various terms. This exploration paints a vivid picture of the cultural and spiritual richness encapsulated in these ancient practices and emphasizes the vital role of Ochai in sustaining this wisdom for future generations. Finally, the ceremony concludes with a prayer for the deities to return to their realms, culminating the spiritual interaction and emphasizing the respectful relationship between humans and divine entities in these practices. Through understanding these practices, an invaluable insight is gained to the complex cultural and religious interactions, thereby appreciating the vital role of Ochai in preserving this ancient wisdom.

Keywords: Ochai/Shaman Ancient Wisdom, Ritual, Mantra/Sacred chant, Ceremony, Deities, Offering Prayer, Humility, Safety, Prosperity, Household Protection, Omnipresence of Deities, Symbolic Cleansing, Blessings. Ancient Wisdom,

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