

# From Rituals to Regulations: A Case Study of Intersections of Religion, Tradition, and Customary Norms in Arunachal Pradesh

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## Abstract

This article explores the complex relationship between religion, tradition, and customary norms, focusing on how religious rituals evolve into normative frameworks that govern behavior. While traditions are often informal and rooted in local culture, religion provides them with legitimacy and symbolic power. Religious ideas can reinforce, alter, or even erase traditional customs, transforming them into legal and moral codes. Using classical sociological theories and a case study from Wasathong village in Arunachal Pradesh, this article demonstrates how religion shapes the formation and erosion of customary laws. It concludes by emphasizing the dynamic interplay between spiritual beliefs and customary practices in diverse socio-cultural contexts.

**Keywords:** religion, tradition, customary norms, ritual, Arunachal Pradesh

## Introduction

Religion, tradition, and customary law are deeply interwoven elements of social life. While religion offers systems of belief and transcendence, tradition captures the long-standing cultural practices of communities. Customary norms—often rooted in both tradition and religion—regulate behavior, delineating what is acceptable and legitimate within a given community.

Over time, religious rituals can transcend spiritual meaning and become regulatory tools embedded in the lives of people. Yet, the process is not unidirectional. Religious conversions, reform movements, and interactions with modern legal systems can challenge and transform longstanding customary practices. This article investigates how religious ideas influence customary norms and vice versa, using a theoretical framework grounded in classical sociology and a real-world case study from Northeast India.

## Methodology

This article employs a qualitative and interpretive sociological method, drawing upon classical sociological theories to analyze the relationship between religion and customary law. A case study approach is used to examine the transformation of the Rangtam tradition in Wasathong village of Tirap district, Arunachal Pradesh. This case study involves an in-depth interview with the gaon bura who is the

head of the village for insightful information and critical reflection on the relationship between religion, tradition and customary law.

## **Results & Discussion**

### **Theoretical Framework**

Émile Durkheim emphasized that religion functions as a source of collective morality. Religious rituals represent the values and moral codes of a community. When repeated and embedded in social structures, these rituals turn into normative practices. Religion is thus a social institution that binds communities and enforces moral discipline.

Max Weber examined the role of religion in legitimizing authority and law. Through the process of 'routinization of charisma,' spiritual revelations become institutionalized into rules and norms, forming customary laws.

Clifford Geertz viewed religion as a cultural system. Symbols, rituals, and myths create moral authority and influence behavior, turning beliefs into social practices.

Legal pluralism recognizes the coexistence of multiple legal systems—state, religious, and customary. Religion may support or challenge existing customs depending on how it is institutionalized.

### **From Ritual to Regulation**

Religious rituals often evolve into social norms. They become regulatory when tied to the community's moral values and practiced across generations. However, religion can also disrupt traditional norms, especially when new doctrines redefine indigenous customs as immoral or outdated.

### **Case Study: The Fading Tradition of Rangtam in Wasathong Village**

In Wasathong village, located in the Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh, a significant transformation is taking place in the realm of customary practices. Among the indigenous communities of this region, the preparation and offering of Rangtam—a locally brewed rice wine—to ancestors has long been a cultural and traditional practice. It holds special significance during festivals and communal events, where Rangtam serves as a symbol of hospitality, unity, and respect within the community. While not a religious ritual, it has been deeply embedded in the village's customary norms and identity.

According to the study, the making of Rangtam is a collective process involving specific knowledge passed down through generations. Its presence in social gatherings has reinforced interpersonal bonds and helped maintain the cultural continuity of the village. Rangtam functioned not only as a social beverage but as a marker of customary responsibility—its preparation and sharing were intertwined with collective identity and belonging.

However, with the growing influence of Christianity in the region, this tradition is now in decline. Local religious leaders and some converted members of the community have begun discouraging the use of Rangtam, viewing it as morally inappropriate or spiritually undesirable. As a result, festivals and public events that once featured Rangtam now face increasing restrictions.

This cultural shift has had a visible impact on community life. In an interview, the Gaon Bura (village elder) of Wasathong shared his concern, stating that “religious beliefs are slowly eroding our traditional practices—especially Rangtam. What was once a part of our cultural identity is now seen as something bad or evil.” His words reflect the broader anxiety among elders who see these changes as a loss of cultural heritage and intergenerational knowledge.

Meanwhile, the younger generation finds itself caught between reverence for ancestral customs and adherence to new religious norms. The decline of Rangtam is not the result of any legal prohibition, but rather a shift in moral discourse influenced by religious beliefs. This case highlights how religion, through informal mechanisms of legitimacy and moral framing, can reshape and even displace customary norms that are not religious in origin.

### **Conclusion**

Religion plays a dual role in society: it can preserve traditions and also bring reform. Rituals, when regularized, gain normative weight and evolve into informal legal codes. However, they are also vulnerable to change with the rise of new religious beliefs. The Rangtam case in Wasathong shows how religion can reshape local customs through moral influence.

Sociological theories by Durkheim, Weber, and Geertz, along with legal pluralism, help us understand these changes. They reveal that rituals are active forces in shaping life, and religion can both regulate and dismantle them. Balancing spiritual beliefs with cultural preservation remains a challenge in today's diverse societies.

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