International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

Culture and Indigenous Knowledge: Native Tea Among the Nocte Tribe of Tirap District, Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract
Indigenous cultural practices often function as repositories of historical memory, identity, and ecological knowledge. This article examines the practice of native tea among the Nocte tribe of Tirap district, Arunachal Pradesh, using The Native Tea by Wangtum H. Lowang (2022) as a secondary indigenous narrative source. Employing qualitative interpretive analysis, the study explores how tea practices transmit cultural memory, reinforce collective identity, and sustain cultural continuity amid colonial encounters and missionary interventions. The findings reveal that native tea constitutes a symbolic cultural identity shaped by indigenous agency, selective engagement with missionary influence, and resistance to colonial domination. Through everyday practices of preparation and consumption, native tea emerges as a living archive of indigenous resilience and cultural continuity.

Keywords: Indigenous knowledge systems; native tea; Nocte tribe; cultural identity; colonial encounters; Arunachal Pradesh; Northeast India

Introduction

Cultural practices embedded in everyday life play a crucial role in sustaining indigenous identities and historical memory. Food and beverage traditions, in particular, often serve as informal systems through which knowledge, values, and social relations are transmitted across generations (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002). In indigenous societies, such practices are deeply intertwined with ecological conditions and historical experiences, including colonial and missionary encounters (Downs, 1992). This article focuses on native tea among the Nocte tribe of Tirap district, Arunachal Pradesh. Drawing on The Native Tea (Lowang, 2022), the study examines how tea—introduced through missionary contact—was selectively adopted and indigenized. Rather than remaining an external influence, tea became embedded in indigenous cultural practices, symbolizing continuity, identity, and resilience.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative secondary-source methodology. The primary data source is The Native Tea by Wangtum H. Lowang (2022), an indigenous-authored work documenting historical narratives, oral traditions, and lived experiences related to tea practices among the Nocte tribe. A thematic

interpretive approach was employed to analyze narratives concerning tea cultivation, cultural identity, missionary encounters, and colonial resistance. Sociological and anthropological theories were applied as analytical tools, while empirical descriptions remained grounded in the secondary source.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis is informed by three interrelated theoretical perspectives. Cultural materialism emphasizes the relationship between ecological conditions, economic practices, and cultural forms (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002). Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus explains how repeated everyday practices—such as tea preparation and consumption—reproduce cultural dispositions and social memory across generations. Indigenous knowledge systems theory highlights experiential, community-based knowledge transmitted through practice and oral tradition (Downs, 1992). Together, these frameworks allow an understanding of native tea as both a material and symbolic practice sustaining cultural identity and continuity.

Data Analysis

Historical narratives challenge colonial accounts that attribute tea cultivation in India solely to British initiatives. According to Lowang (2022), the Nocte tribe played a role in establishing early tea gardens in the region as early as October 1834. American missionaries later attempted to promote tea plantation as part of economic and educational initiatives; however, the Nocte community selectively declined these efforts due to alternative economic resources such as salt springs. Tea cultivation also became a site of colonial tension, contributing to the Anglo-Wancho War of 1875, which reflected indigenous resistance to external domination. Native tea today functions as a symbolic cultural identity, embodying collective memory, resilience, and cultural continuity. Through everyday practices, these layered histories are remembered and reproduced, making native tea a living archive of indigenous experience.

Conclusion

Native tea among the Nocte tribe represents a convergence of history, culture, and indigenous knowledge. While its origins are linked to missionary introduction, its contemporary meaning is deeply indigenous. The practice demonstrates how external influences can be transformed through local adaptation into symbols of cultural identity and continuity. Recognizing such practices is essential for understanding indigenous agency, resilience, and the dynamic nature of tradition in Northeast India.

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