

Ritual Landscapes and Living Memory: Ethnography, Orality, and Indigenous Cosmology among the Highlander Tiwas of Assam

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ABSTRACT

Conventional historiography privileges textual archives, often marginalizing communities like the highlander Tiwa of Northeast India and reducing their complex worldviews to simplified outsider categories like ‘tribal animism’ or ‘folk Hinduism.’ This paper examines Tiwa ritual life through an ethnographic framework centering oral traditions, lived experiences, and ancestral institutions like the *phoit*, *shamadi*, and *pinung-krai*. Focusing on major rituals (e.g., *Sokra Misawa*, *Wanchuwa*) and megalithic practices, it has been argued that Tiwa ritualism forms a coherent, independent cosmology rather than a derivative of mainstream traditions. By de-centering colonial and Sanskritizingⁱ interpretations, this study demonstrates how ethnography serves as a vital rescue mechanism and ethical intervention. For a community lacking written historical archives, prioritizing indigenous epistemologies preserves a fragile cultural system against external distortion, restoring dignity to marginalized histories and establishing oral and ritual knowledge as legitimate historical archives.

Keywords: Phoit, Shamadi, Pinung-Krai, Mindai, Pamari

INTRODUCTION

Historical writing has traditionally depended upon written archives, inscriptions, royal records, colonial reports, and official documentation. Communities lacking a written literary tradition have therefore often remained invisible within mainstream historiography or have been represented through the perspectives of outsiders. Such dependence on textual archives creates what Jacques Derrida describes as the ‘hegemony of the archive,’ where authority over history rests upon written preservation rather than lived memory (Derrida, 1996). In regions such as Northeast India, where numerous indigenous communities maintained oral traditions instead of written chronicles, this archival bias has produced distorted representations of local societies and belief systems.

The Tiwa community of Assam offers a striking example of this historical marginalization. Earlier colonial administrators and many subsequent scholars classified the Tiwas under the exonym ‘Lalung,’ a term that lacks indigenous cultural legitimacy and is widely regarded by community members as derogatory. Moreover, Tiwa ritualistic practices were frequently interpreted through reductive frameworks such as ‘animism,’ ‘tribal superstition,’ or incomplete forms of Hinduism. Such interpretations overlooked the internal coherence and philosophical depth of Tiwa cosmology.

This paper argues that ethnography provides a necessary corrective to such limitations of conventional historiography. Through participant observation, oral testimony, and field engagement, ethnography allows scholars to understand communities from within rather than imposing external categories upon them. The Tiwa ritualistic worldview, when examined ethnographically, reveals a sophisticated system of ancestral worship, territorial identity, ritual sovereignty, and ecological ethics that cannot be adequately understood through textual or colonial frameworks alone.

The paper further explores how Tiwa ritual life is organized around institutions such as the *phoit* (territorial ritual unit), the *shamadi* (male youth dormitory), and the *pinung-krai* (root village). It also examines ritual performances including *Sokra Misawa*, *Langkhon*, *Wanchuwa*, *Yangli*, and *Khel Chawa*, demonstrating how these practices preserve social memory and reinforce collective identity. By focusing on these lived traditions, the paper seeks to reposition Tiwa culture not as a relic of the past but as an evolving and resilient indigenous knowledge system.

ETHNOGRAPHY AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

Ethnography emerged within anthropology as a methodological approach centered upon immersive fieldwork and participant observation. Clifford Geertz's concept of 'thick description' emphasized that cultural actions can only be understood when interpreted within their broader social and symbolic contexts (Geertz, 1973)ⁱⁱ. Ethnography therefore moves beyond surface observation and attempts to understand the meanings communities themselves assign to rituals, symbols, and practices.

In the context of indigenous societies, ethnography also carries ethical significance. Colonial writings often portrayed tribal communities as static, primitive, or culturally deficient. Such representations justified administrative control and cultural assimilation. Ranajit Guha's critique of colonial historiography demonstrates how elite narratives systematically excluded subaltern voices from historical discourse (Guha, 1988). Ethnographic approaches challenge this exclusion by foregrounding oral testimony and lived experience.

For the Tiwa community, ethnography is particularly important because much of their historical consciousness survives through ritual practice, oral narratives, and material culture rather than written documentation. Field-based interaction reveals that Tiwa social identity is deeply connected to ritual participation and ancestral memory. Concepts such as *mindai* (spirits), *pamari* (ancestor's village), and *phoit* are not abstract religious categories but lived realities embedded in everyday life.

Ethnography also demands reflexivity from the researcher. Scholars studying indigenous communities must remain aware of their own cultural assumptions and avoid imposing external religious or political frameworks upon local belief systems. Earlier attempts to interpret Tiwa rituals solely through Sanskritization or conversion narratives ignored the independent philosophical foundations of Tiwa cosmology. A field-oriented approach instead recognizes Tiwa ritualism as a self-sufficient worldview with its own categories of sacredness, morality, and social organization.

THE TIWA COMMUNITY AND INDIGENOUS COSMOLOGY

The Tiwas belong to the Bodo-Garo linguistic subgroup and inhabit both the plains and hill regions of Assam and Meghalaya. Significant Tiwa populations are found in Morigaon, Nagaon, Kamrup, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, West Karbi Anglong, East Karbi Anglong, and Ri-Bhoi district of Meghalaya. While the lowland Tiwas have experienced considerable influence from Hinduism and Christianity, the highland Tiwas continue to preserve many ancestral ritual traditions.

Central to Tiwa cosmology is the belief in *pamari*, the ancestor's village. Unlike Hinduism and Abrahamicⁱⁱⁱ traditions that emphasize heaven and hell, the Tiwa worldview imagines the afterlife as a return to ancestral origin. After death, the human spirit becomes a *mindai* and joins the spirits residing in the ancestors' village called *pamari*. Ritual practices therefore maintain continuous communication between the living and the ancestral world. The idea of a *mindai* may be translated as a spirit rather than considering it as an omnipotent god. The Tiwas do not traditionally believe in a single omnipotent deity. Some *mindais* are worshiped for the protection of territory while others are for the households.

Instead, the cosmos is inhabited by multiple spirits possessing both benevolent (*molonda*) and destructive (*sholonda*) capacities. These spirits are associated with forests, rivers, mountains, households, agriculture, and territorial spaces. Ritual sacrifices and offerings are performed to establish balance between humans and these unseen forces. In every household, seeking the blessings of the *mindais* according to the guided rules of the clan rituals offerings are instituted. In public domain across different clan major rituals are celebrated according to the guideline of the *phoit* which is a place based social identity.

Animal sacrifice remains an important ritual element. Pigs, goats, fowls, and eggs are offered to the spirits, while divination is conducted through examination of the liver and heart of sacrificed animals. The ritual known as *tuti-tana*, involving egg sacrifice, is particularly significant in determining the auspiciousness of future activities. Such practices reveal a cosmology in which ritual action serves both spiritual and social purposes.

The persistence of megalithic traditions further demonstrates the antiquity of Tiwa ritual culture. At Amsai village in West Karbi Anglong, thousands of megaliths continue to stand at *Chongkhong Shal*, where villagers annually honour ancestors through offerings and ritual gatherings. The continuity of these practices suggests a long historical relationship between sacred landscapes and collective memory.

PHOIT, TERRITORY, AND RITUAL SOVEREIGNTY

One of the most distinctive features of Tiwa social organization is the *phoit* system. Conventional historiography often simplifies indigenous social structures under generalized labels such as 'tribe' or 'clan.' Ethnographic evidence, however, reveals that the *phoit* represents a far more complex territorial and ritual institution.

A *phoit* is organized around a *pinung-krai* or root village, which functions as the ritual and administrative center. Members identify themselves through attachment to their *phoit* using the suffix '*wali*,' such as *Amsai-wali* or *Marjong-wali*. This territorial affiliation shapes ritual participation, social identity, and collective memory.

Each *phoit* maintains ritual sovereignty over specific ceremonies. Rituals such as *Sokra Misawa*, *Yangli*, *Langkhon*, and *Wanchuwa* may be observed across several *phoits*, yet each performs them according to distinct local traditions. Outsiders may observe another *phoit*'s rituals but cannot freely participate in them. Such restrictions reinforce ritual boundaries and preserve localized identity.

The *phoit* system also demonstrates how ritual authority is decentralized. Rather than a centralized priesthood, ritual knowledge is distributed among village elders, *shamadi* officials, and hereditary functionaries such as the *loro* and *hatari*. This creates a dynamic ritual order in which social organization and cosmology are inseparable.

THE SHAMADI AND SOCIAL GOVERNANCE

The *shamadi*, or male youth dormitory, forms the institutional heart of Tiwa ritual life. Located in the

pinung-krai, it functions not merely as a dormitory but as a center of education, governance, and cultural transmission. Young men known as *panthais* receive training in music, dance, ritual conduct, craftsmanship, and community responsibilities.

The *panthai-khel*, or youth committee, manages many aspects of village administration under the supervision of senior officials such as the *shangtoloji*. Ritual festivals, repairs of the *shamadi*, and communal activities are coordinated through this institution. Public rituals are often linked to the periodic maintenance and reconstruction of the *shamadi*, usually every five to ten years.

Although the *shamadi* is a male-exclusive institution, Tiwa society remains fundamentally matrilineal. Women occupy positions of social respect and play indispensable roles during rituals. Maternal female relatives assist in dressing ritual officials and preparing ceremonial offerings. This gender dynamic illustrates a balance between ritual specialization and matrilineal social structure.

The *shamadi* therefore serves multiple purposes: it is simultaneously a ritual center, educational institution, political assembly, and symbol of collective continuity. Its decline in certain regions due to modernization and religious conversion has contributed significantly to the weakening of traditional Tiwa identity.

MAJOR PUBLIC RITUALS AND SACRED PERFORMANCE

Sokra Misawa

Sokra Misawa is one of the most important Tiwa public rituals associated with agricultural fertility. Celebrated between February and May, the festival coincides with the blooming of the *khum-khadi* flower. The term *sokra* means ‘doing together,’ while *misawa* means ‘dancing together,’ emphasizing collective participation.

The festival seeks blessings for agricultural prosperity and marks the ceremonial beginning of cultivation activities. Musical instruments such as the *khram* (long drum), *pangsi* (flute), and *thurang* accompany ritual dances performed by the *panthais*. Ritual proceedings begin at the house of the *loro*, reinforcing the centrality of the *pinung-krai*.

Langkhon

The *Langkhon* ritual demonstrates the intimate ecological relationship between the Tiwas and bamboo forests. Conducted before harvesting bamboo shoots, the ritual seeks permission from *Palakhongor*, the guardian spirit of the forest. Without performing this ritual, community members traditionally avoid consuming bamboo shoots.

An intriguing aspect of *Langkhon* is the use of sexually explicit songs during ritual performances. These songs function symbolically to distract outsiders from sacred sacrificial acts. Although such expressions would normally be socially prohibited, ritual contexts temporarily suspend ordinary moral restrictions, highlighting the liminal character of sacred festivals.

Wanchuwa

The *Wanchuwa* ritual is observed after sowing seeds and is intended to ensure agricultural abundance. During the ceremony, participants produce rice flour and distribute rice beer (*chu*). Ritual dancing and communal feasting reinforce solidarity among members of the *phoit*. Rice powder is produced through rituals and dance during *Wanchuwa* celebration. Both *amkha-wali* and *marjong-wali phoit* observe this ritual in their respective ways.

Khel Chawa and Muinari Kanthi

Among the *Makro-wali phoit*, *Khel Chawa* serves as the principal ritual festival. Continuous drumming

over three days creates a powerful ritual atmosphere. Unlike other *phoits*, the *Makro-wali* use blunt sticks rather than sharp weapons during animal sacrifice, demonstrating ritual diversity within Tiwa society. The associated *Muinari Kanthi* dance involves both young men and women performing together in front of the *shamadi*. Girls cover their faces during the performance, reflecting ritual modesty and symbolic anonymity.

Yangli

The *Yangli* ritual is closely associated with rice cultivation and collective prosperity. Although some scholars have attempted to equate it with worship of the Hindu goddess Lakshmi, ethnographic evidence indicates that the ritual possesses an independent indigenous significance.

During *Yangli*, women from maternal families bring rice beer, sticky rice, and dried fish for participants. This exchange of gifts symbolizes kinship solidarity and ritual reciprocity. The festival illustrates how agricultural production, gender relations, and cosmology intersect within Tiwa society.

Megaliths, Memory, and the Unwritten Archive

The megalithic traditions of the Tiwas constitute an important form of historical memory. In the absence of written chronicles, megaliths function as material archives connecting present communities with ancestral generations. The annual erection of monoliths at Amsai village demonstrates the continuity of these practices over centuries.

Such monuments embody collective remembrance and territorial belonging. They also challenge assumptions that indigenous histories lack historical depth simply because they are unwritten. The megaliths of Amsai stand as enduring testimony to a ritual civilization rooted in memory, landscape, and ancestral continuity.

However, many of these sacred sites are increasingly threatened. In places such as Gobha^{iv}, ancient Tiwa megaliths have been appropriated or repainted by dominant other religious groups, erasing their indigenous significance. These transformations reflect broader processes of cultural assimilation and marginalization.

Conclusion

The ethnographic study of the Tiwa community reveals a complex ritualistic worldview grounded in ancestral memory, territorial identity, and sacred ecology. Institutions such as the *phoit*, *shamadi*, and *pinung-krai* demonstrate sophisticated forms of social organization that cannot be adequately understood through perceptions of colonial narratives or mainstream religious categories.

By privileging oral traditions and lived experience, ethnography challenges the limitations of text-centered historiography. It allows scholars to recognize indigenous cosmologies as legitimate systems of knowledge rather than incomplete versions of dominant religions. The Tiwa case illustrates how ritual performances, megalithic practices, and ancestral worship function as living archives preserving historical consciousness across generations.

At the same time, the erosion of Tiwa ritual institutions due to religious conversion, linguistic decline, and modernization threatens the survival of this cultural system. The disappearance of *phoits*, weakening of the *shamadi* institution, and transformation of sacred sites indicate the fragility of indigenous heritage in contemporary Assam.

Ethnography therefore becomes more than an academic method; it is an ethical responsibility. Documenting the lived realities of marginalized communities helps preserve cultural memory and resists the erasure produced by dominant historical narratives. In the multicultural landscape of Assam, an

inclusive historiography must acknowledge oral traditions, ritual practices, and indigenous epistemologies as central components of history itself.

Important Images-



Image 1: Summarised presentation: Tiwa world view



Image 2: Distorted Megaliths by the followers of other dominant faith



Image 3: Megaliths at *Chongkhong shal*, Amsai village.



Image 4: *Wanchuwa* performance



Image 5: Sokra dancers at Amsai village



Image 6: Langkhon ritual at Marjong village



Image 7: Shamadi at the Amsai village



Image 8: Elders of performing *khel chawa* rituals

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End Notes:

ⁱ Sanskritization is a concept introduced by the eminent Indian sociologist M.N. Srinivas to describe a process of cultural assimilation and social mobility within the Indian social hierarchy. It refers to the process by which a marginalized group, 'tribal' community, or lower caste alters its customs, rituals, ideology, and way of life in the direction of a dominant, so called frequently 'twice-born' (higher) caste. In the context of indigenous communities like the Tiwa, historical assessments viewing their practices through the lens of Sanskritization often misinterpret distinct, autonomous indigenous cosmologies as mere derivative or transitional phases of mainstream Hindu traditions, thereby erasing their unique cultural sovereignty.

ⁱⁱ While Geertz popularized and built his interpretive anthropology paradigm around 'thick description,' he explicitly notes in the essay that he borrowed the phrase from the British ordinary language philosopher Gilbert Ryle (specifically from Ryle's essays 'Thinking and Reflecting' and 'The Thinking of Thoughts').

ⁱⁱⁱ In Abrahamic traditions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), the afterlife is fundamentally structured around a linear view of time, divine judgment, and a moral dualism exemplified by the concepts of Heaven and Hell. Heaven is conceptualized as the ultimate, eternal dwelling place of the righteous in the direct presence of the Divine, characterized by absolute peace, reward, and spiritual fulfilment. Conversely, Hell is understood as a place of eternal separation from God, punishment, or spiritual torment for the unrighteous.

When applied from an outsider's perspective to indigenous cosmologies like that of the Tiwa—where the afterlife is often conceptualized through spaces like *pamari* (the ancestor's village)—this rigid, moralizing dualism fails to capture the reciprocal, kinship-based relationship between the living, the ancestors, and the sacred geography.

^{iv} Gobha is a village where traditional Tiwa king resides in Morigaon district of Assam. It is located 15 kilometers away towards South East from Jagiroad town. Many megaliths and other archeological remnants of the Tiwa kingdom has been already destroyed in the process of uninterrupted land cutting and ongoing projects of private and government sponsored development projects.