



Ritualistic world of the Tiwa community: a short photo essay

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This photo essay on the ritualistic world of the Tiwa highland community is a product of long-term field research carried out since 2015 in West Karbi Anglong district in Assam, and Ri-Bhoi district in Meghalaya, India. Unlike their lowland counterparts, Tiwa highlanders embrace the older traditions as evidenced in their ritual and cultural practices. The images in this essay are drawn from ongoing fieldwork, and are supported by preliminary textual descriptions, though seeking in an ethnographic way to present a general picture of the socio-cultural and ritualistic life of Tiwa highlanders which is largely unfamiliar to scholars in an otherwise rich Northeast Indian ethnographic record.

Keywords: Tiwa, highlander, Karbi Anglong, Assam, Meghalaya, Northeast, India, ritual

Introducing the Tiwas

The Tiwas are an indigenous community living in Assam, a state in India's northeast. In Assam, they are designated as a Scheduled Tribe community under India's Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Act, 1950. Tiwa populations are found in both the lowland and highland parts of the state, and many live in the adjoining state of Meghalaya. The Tiwas belong to the Bodo-Garo sub-group of peoples and speak a Tibeto-Burman language. The community traces its descent from a sacred water body and believes they are all its children. The word 'Ti' means water. Despite the social changes in the region over time, most of the highland Tiwas strictly follow their traditional rites and rituals.

Some neighbouring communities in lowland Assam also call them *Lalung* – a name that came to prominence during the British colonial administration. Archival records and official documents from the colonial era have extensively used the term *Lalung* to refer to the Tiwas. This term continued to be used after 1947 when India gained independence, and the Tiwas were accorded Scheduled Tribe status. The Tiwas, however, consider that the designation *Lalung* is derogatory and does not represent any linguistic or cultural aspects of their society.

Tiwas observe many rituals in their traditional belief systems. However, this essay, with the help of supporting images, attempts to portray only the major rituals along with the main features and terminologies of their colourful world of belief and practice.

Sogra misawa:

Sogra, in the Tiwa language, means ‘doing something together’. *Misawa* is ‘dancing’. Therefore, literally, the words *sogra* and *misawa* together mean ‘dancing together’. This ritual is celebrated with much festivity between February and May every year when a special kind of wildflower called *khum-khadi* blooms in the hills.

Sogra misawa is a festival where the Tiwas petition for the fertility of the soil in which they grow their food, and it is their main ritualistic event associated with food production. Tiwas never perform any other ritual concerning agriculture without observing the *sogra*. A significant aspect of this festival is that many Tiwa *phoits* (this term is explained later in the article), such as the *amsai-wali*, *aamkha-wali*, *marjong-wali*, *lumphoi-wali* and *amri-wali* organise this festival in their own areas and with their own specific rituals. Three main musical instruments are played during the observance of the *sogra misawa* – *khram* (long drum), *pangsi* (flute), and *thurang* (special flute with one hole in each end).

During the *sogra misawa*, the rituals related to the dance start from the house of the *loro*, considered by the Tiwas to be the chief directly under the traditional king. He administers overall activities related to his village with the help of other office bearers, following certain rules and regulations. The central area where the *loro* resides is called the *pinung kraï* or the central village. A *pinung kraï* plays a central role in the formation of a *phoit*. The term *phoit* is one of the core pillars of the traditional rituals and belief system of the Tiwa community, and a brief discussion about the term is essential at this point.



Image 1: A *Sogra* dancer of *Amsai-wali phoit* with *khum-khadi* headgear.

Understanding the *phoit*

All villages under one *pinung kraï* follow the same ritualistic order when worshipping territorial and house spirits in accordance with their *phoit* allegiance. Several families may belong to the same family tree or a clan but differ in observing rituals related to the same spirit due to the *phoit* within which they reside.

The uniqueness of the *phoit* system underlines its significance in Tiwa society. It also highlights how this social structure differs from our conventional understanding of a clan or a sub-group of people within a single ethnic group. Some *phoits* are known by the headgear that their male officials wear. These headdresses have unique designs and are not used by officials of other *phoits*. The most common feature

that the Tiwas used to signify their attachment to a *phoit*, however, was the suffix ‘*wali*’ used after the name of the *pinung kra*i or the central village.

For instance, Tiwas belonging to the *amsai phoit* would identify themselves as *amsai-wali*. Each *phoit* would observe a ritual in its own way. For example, although both the *amsai-wali* and the *marjong-wali* Tiwas observe the *sogra misawa*, there are differences in the observance process. Again, a member of a specific *phoit* can watch the ritual of a different *phoit*, but cannot participate in it. Only in the last part of the ritual, the *wanchuwa*, are members from the *amkha-wali phoit* allowed by the *marjong-wali phoit* to participate.



Image 2: Pairing the bamboo flutes to be used in *sogra* rituals. On the first day of the ritual, many pairs of flutes are made and tested in the *shamadi*.



Image 3: Different types of headgear of the *marjong-wali* Tiwa *phoit*. Strings popping out from the headdress indicate seniority levels between these four young men. They are seniors in the *panthai-khel* or committee of young male members who work on social issues, rituals, and other matters from the *shamadi*, or male dormitory, inside the village.

***Shamadi*: core of traditional Tiwa society and culture**

Like many indigenous communities, the Tiwas have a dormitory system for males known as the *shamadi*. It is one of the central pillars of the Tiwa ritualistic world and belief system. Considered a symbol of cultural identity, it is a space where young males learn about their people's social and cultural practices, as well as skills related to crafts and livelihood. Male community members also use the *shamadi* as a living space, but females are not allowed inside.

The *shamadi* is a significant place for the formative years of a *panthai's* (young Tiwa man) life. Here he learns about social behaviour, song and dance, musical instruments, and crafts. It is also where elders teach the *panthais* the rituals of their *phoit*. Earlier, *panthais* with administrative responsibilities needed to stay overnight at the *shamadi*. However, with time, this tradition has been relaxed.

To organize activities in a *shamadi* and the village, the elders form a committee called a *panthai-khel*, comprising young men. It is headed by office bearers called *shangdolo*, *shangmaji*, and *shuruma*. The *shangdolo* is the dormitory head, while the *shangmaji* and the *shuruma* aid him in different matters. These officials are assisted by three *panthais* known as *khurusa*. A *shamadi* is built with elaborate rituals and has three main wood pillars called *thomkhunda*. Each *thomkhunda* is given the title of one of the three village officials. The front pillar is assigned to the *shangdolo*, the middle one to the *shangmaji*, and the third to the *shuruma*.

A *shamadi* is repaired after every five years. Some *phoits* observe festivals such as *wanchuwa*, *khel-chawa*, and *muinari-kanthi* during the maintenance of the *shamadi*. After the maintenance work is complete, the village elders form a new *panthai-khel* or committee of young members for the next administrative cycle.



Image 4: A *shamadi* or male dormitory at Amsai *pinung-krai*.

Tiwas in the highlands generally follow the matrilineal system like their neighbours, the Khasis and Pnars (also known as Jaintias). However, outside individual households, on many occasions, the women are silent spectators, and the males make the decisions. At this point, it may be mentioned that women are not allowed to enter the *shamadi* at any time. The *shamadi* is considered to be exclusively for the male members of the community.

Nevertheless, women enjoy high respect in society and contribute by generating income for their families through participation in various activities. From agriculture to household work, women are an integral part of Tiwa society. In the traditional social structure of the highland-dwelling Tiwas, women enjoy a more important position in the family than their lowland-dwelling Tiwa sisters. Both the men and women work together in their fields, sharing everything from ground preparation to seed sowing to harvesting.



Image 5: Tiwa girl carries a sack of paddy called a *maiphur* from the field to her home.

In all the major rituals related to *sogra misawa*, *wanchuwa*, *khel chawa*, and *yangli*, women act as the facilitators of the ceremonies. In fact, without the participation of aunts and maternal family members, no village officials can be dressed up for the rituals. Female relatives on the maternal side must visit the community ritual sites carrying gifts for all the participants and dancers.

In their traditional social practices, Tiwas believe that the union of opposites is crucial to create something new and fruitful. Therefore, one may find men and women working together in the fields at all stages of the agricultural cycle. As a post-harvesting activity, during the threshing process, they sing songs together and separate the paddy seeds from the plant. The rituals involved in this process are collectively known as the *mai-photala*. In these rituals, *tuti-tana* (the sacrifice of an egg), singing songs, and dancing are considered essential.



Image 6: *Mai-photala* activities performed by men and women together.

It is not that men and women never dance together in the Tiwa social domain. In the rituals related to the worship of the *kabla mindai* by the *magrowali phoit*, boys and girls dance hand-in-hand. This dance is called the *muinari kanthi*. During the dance, both male and female senior members of the *phoit* ensure that no one displays inappropriate behaviour in front of the public.

Kabla* worship and the *muinari kanthi

Muinari kanthi is a ritual of the *magrowali* Tiwas. Most of the villages of this *phoit* are located in the highlands of Assam and Meghalaya. In this ritual, young boys and girls dance together at high speed in front of the *shamadi*. Girls must cover their faces during the dance. As in other rituals, rice beer or *chu* plays an integral part.

During the repairs to the *shamadi*, the *magrowali phoit* Tiwas worship the spirit called the *kabla mindai*. The period between two consecutive rituals is five years, and the main sacrificial animal is changed every time. For example, if the sacrifice in one year is a black goat, then for the next sacrifice, five years hence, they offer a pig. Likewise, after ten years, the *magrowali phoit* sacrifices a cow. No other *phoit* of the Tiwa community sacrifices a cow to the spirits in any of their rituals.



Image 6: Muinari kanthi dance performed by the young boys and girls of the magrowali phoit. A senior lady is seen disciplining the male dancer and showing him how he should hold the girl's waist belt properly.



Image 7: Tiwa elder of the magrowali phoit, who disciplines the erring male dancers during the muinari kanthi dance in Magro village, Ri-bhoi district, Meghalaya.

Rice, resource, and worship: ritual of *Yangli*

The *yangli* rituals require dance and the sacrifice of goats, pigs, and fowls to ensure community well-being. Over the last few decades, a tendency to associate this ritual with the goddess Lakshmi from the Hindu pantheon has been seen among a section of the Tiwa society.

The purpose of this ritual is to ensure good fortune for the *phoit* in specific areas of life and in general. For example, to ensure a good harvest, the men dance throughout the day in the sacrifice arena and women from their maternal families come to the field with gifts, including rice beer (*chu*) and other edibles, including sticky rice and dried fish. *Yangli* is performed in the early part or the sowing time of paddy cultivation. This ritual is not performed every year by a village. It is performed after every five years following the guidelines of the *phoit*.



Image 8: A lady from a distant village under *Amsai-wali phoit* presents a gift to a participant in the *Yangli* ritual.

At the end of the paddy plantation, as an extension of the *yangli*, villagers offer community service in the paddy field of the *Hadari* or village priest. In this ceremony, after the sacrifice of two pigs on the village border, people dance in the muddy field. Then, they start planting rice seedlings while singing songs of happiness.



Image 9: Last part of the yangli dance in the muddy field.



Image 10: Community members waiting for orders from the Hadari's wife to start paddy plantation at his field.

Seeking blessing for the bamboo

Bamboo is an integral part of the Tiwa society. Tiwas eat bamboo shoots and use bamboo products in almost every aspect of life. The *langkhon-ritual* is associated with worshipping the territorial guardian spirit of the forest and harvesting the bamboo shoots. It is an annual event observed in September or October before the community collects bamboo shoots from the forest.



Image 11: Tiwa girl preparing her basket (*kho*) to carry bamboo shoots from the forest to her home to prepare a delicacy called the *khunji*.

The community asks for blessings and permission from *palakhongor* – the spirit associated with this ritual – prior to harvesting bamboo shoots. Without performing this ritual, the Tiwa are unwilling to eat the bamboo shoots. Generally, a fowl is offered as a sacrifice to please the spirit and seek his blessings. The *marjong-wali*, *amsai-wali* and *rongkhoi-wali phoits* are the primary observers of this festival.

During the observance of the *langkhon* ritual, *panthais* or young male members of the community dance with decorated bamboo poles, following the tune of the *pangsi* and the beat of the *khram*. A remarkable aspect of this ritual is the use of sexually explicit phrases in the song and dance performances.

The young men sing erotic songs to distract outsiders and guests from the main process of the sacrifice and other rituals. Under normal circumstances, society does not allow such foul songs in public spaces and offenders are fined heavily. During festivities and the observance of the rituals, the arrival of guests is a normal occurrence in every village household. They are served rice beer and other refreshments. Close relatives and guests from other communities are offered rice and various dishes.



Image 12: *Langkhon* ritual performance.



Image 13: Tiwa woman and her children wait for guests during the festive observance of *langkhon* rituals in Marjong village.

Offerings and erection of monolith

To satisfy the guardian spirits of the households, mountains, fields, rain, and every part of their day-to-day life, Tiwas offer sacrifices of various animals and fowl on different occasions. They also sacrifice eggs. As mentioned above, the egg sacrifice ritual is known as the *tuti-tana*.

A fortune teller examines the hearts and livers of the sacrificed animal and predicts the probable results based on specific signs. Usually, during the initiation of a new project, social programme, or household activity, village elders perform the *tuti-tana* act by sacrificing chicken eggs.



Image 14: Chicken egg sacrifice known as *tuti-tana*.

The meat of the sacrificed animals is then cooked using salt, rice powder, and the leaves of a plant called *samsuri*. Using turmeric and other spices is prohibited in this ritualistic meal. In addition to the rituals observed in public spaces and within the family household, Tiwas erect monoliths on different occasions to pay respect to the departed souls of their ancestors and other unseen forces of nature.

All the important community events, including remembering and respecting the ancestors, beginning the yearly agricultural activities, and observing festivals for the erection of monoliths, are considered crucial elements of Tiwa society. Every year, prior to the start of the agricultural activities, Tiwa villagers erect a monolith at a place called the *jongkhong-sal* after offering a goat. In the Tiwa village of Amsai, the *jongkhong-sal* has more than 1,800 such monoliths. Here, the villagers worship their ancestors and seeking blessing. Villagers bring rice beer to the site of worship and then mix the contributions together. A portion of the mixture is offered to the spirits, and the rest is consumed by community members.



Image 15: Mixing *chu* in one container for consumption by community members during a goat sacrifice in the *jongkhong-sal* at Amsai village, West Karbi Anglong.

Methods of sacrifice

It is important to mention that all the *phoits* do not follow the same rules when sacrificing animals. For example, during the *khel chawa* rituals, *magro-wali* Tiwas, unlike many other *phoits*, sacrifice the animal using blunt sticks. Other *phoits* use sharp or pointed weapons to sacrifice animals like pigs and goats. The *khel chawa* ritual is observed after every five years in a village during the time of repairing the *shamadi*.

The *khel chawa* is the primary ritualistic festival of the *magro-wali phoit*. This *phoit* does not celebrate *sogra misawa*. The purpose of this ritual is to seek blessings and protection of the omnipotent spirit *chari-pai*. The *khel chawa* is observed for three days by all villages under this *phoit*. A significant feature of these three days is the continuous playing of the long drums called the *khram*. The drummers take turns and provide ceaseless drumming for the three days of the festival.



Image 16: Pig sacrifices by members of the *magro-wali phoit* Tiwas during the *khel chawa* ritual.



Image 17: Drummers at the *khel chawa* ritual.

Absence of hell or heaven

In the belief system of the highland Tiwas, there is no concept of heaven or hell. These Tiwas believe that, after death, the deceased's spirit reunites with the ancestors' spirits. It is also believed that a Tiwa soul originates in the place where the ancestral spirits dwell. Therefore, according to Tiwa belief, after a person's death, the soul becomes part of the *mindai* or omnipotent spirit. Hence, on many occasions, Tiwas worship their dead relatives along with other guardian spirits and forces of nature. The place of spirits is called *pamari* by the Tiwas.

In this belief system, Tiwas try to please both beneficial and destructive spirits. Some of these spirits are considered protector of a territory, while others are looked upon as protectors of individual households. Sacrifices of animals and eggs are essential to satisfy the spirits.

The way in which the Tiwa people interact with their spirits is significant in understanding this worldview. For instance, the Tiwas do not fear spirits with destructive powers. Along with the benevolent spirits, the malevolent ones are also considered integral to people's day-to-day lives. The multitude of spirits means that some are worshipped by the community or the *phoits*, and the rest are worshipped by individuals within their own households.



Image 18: Tiwa elders sing a hymn to the *chari-pai* spirit during the *khel chawa* ritual to ensure a good harvest.

Wanchuwa is a ritual to ensure good fortune or a rich harvest. It is observed with festivity by the *amkha-wali phoit* after sowing the seeds of various crops on the mountain slopes. The event occurs between June and July every year when the spirit *lampha-raja* is worshipped. Ground rice flour (rice powder) is produced by adult male participants in the course of the ritual. Women help by supplying *chu* during the dancing.

The *marjong-wali phoit* also observes this ritual in its own way. For both ritualistic and day-to-day purposes, the Tiwas use a *chu-lao* or a beer container made from a particular variety of dried bottle-gourd. *Chu* is distributed with the help of a special dispenser made from bamboo or wood called the *tran*.



Image 19: *Wanchuwa* ritual, men dancing before preparing the rice powder to worship the guardian spirit *lampha-raja*.



Image 20: *Wanchuwa* dancers waiting for a signal from the elders to start pounding rice.

Like the *khel chawa*, the *wanchuwa* features incessant drumming during the two days of its observance from the beginning to the end of all the rituals. Young women of the community are entrusted with the task of preparing and providing refreshments and *chu* for the performers and guests at the festival. Indeed, *chu* is an integral part of Tiwa society and culture.

Conclusion

Field data suggest that practitioners of the traditional ritual and belief system of the Tiwa community have decreased over time. Large-scale conversion of the Tiwas to other dominant religious faiths in the lowlands of Assam has already led to some *phoits* disappearing from the scene. For example, the *mayongwali phoit* disappeared a few decades back. Without any of the central pillars of the traditional belief system – the *shamadi*, the *loro* system and village administration, the mother tongue, and the traditional concepts of *mindais* – a *phoit* slips into oblivion and finally ceases to exist.

Thus, traditional Tiwa beliefs and rituals have confronted many challenges and suffered considerable setbacks over time. Although different socio-cultural and literary groups of the Tiwa community have made attempts in the last few decades to popularize and practice the traditional belief systems among the lowland-dwelling Tiwas, the results have not been satisfactory. As per the 2011 Census, out of a Tiwa population of 3,71,000, only 31,421 can speak the Tiwa languages.

Therefore, one may find that traditional rituals and social practices are now strictly confined to Tiwa villages in hilly areas in both Assam and Meghalaya states of India. Mass conversion to other dominant religious faiths has detached the plains-dwelling Tiwas from their ancestral practices.

By contrast, in the highlands, some of the rituals discussed in this essay have gained popularity with the passage of time and increasingly take the form of festivals. These rituals and festivals have appeared as the Tiwa community's identity markers over the last few decades. Whatever the outward expression of these rituals, they are attached to the core values and practices of the community. The possibility of spreading these core values to the plains-dwelling Tiwas will be tested over time.



Image 21: These monoliths, erected by the Tiwas, have been painted by practitioners of other faiths and claimed as part of their religious practices at Gobha, the village of the Tiwa king.

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