

Traditional Festivals and Events of the Wancho Tribe

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Abstract: The numerous tribes living in the states of the North-Eastern region of India are enticing to the visitors. These tribes, despite conversion to different religions and exposure to modern civilization cling to their norms and customs with sincerity and faith. The Wancho tribe is one of the attractions of the North-East. The Wanchos celebrate different festivals every year with zeal and vigor. They celebrate these festivals as they believe it is a way to pay homage to their deities. They also think that by pleasing the Gods they can attain peace, prosperity and harmony. The festivals are replete with traditional tribal dances, songs, prayers, animal sacrifices and offerings. In this article titled- “Traditional Festivals and Events of the Wancho Tribe”, a detailed study of the festivals based on agriculture is being wonderfully presented.

Keywords: Wanchos Traditional Festivals and Events.

1. INTRODUCTION

North-East of India is the abode for various communities and tribes. Amongst the notable tribe of the North-East Wancho is one such tribe. The Wanchos belong to the extensive Naga ethnic group. The Wanchos are Mongolian from anthropological perspective and Tibeto-Burmese from the perspective of linguistics. They mainly reside in the south west area of Longding district of Arunachal Pradesh. In Assam, Wancho inhabitation can be found in the districts of Dibrugarh and Sivasagar. No Indigenous scripts could be found of the historical introduction of the Wanchos. According to the legends prevailing among Wanchos, their original homeland was Tinu Longpho Sanu situated at Tuensang district of Nagaland located on the other side of Patkai. From this place they divided into two different groups and moved to their present accommodation through two different routes called Tangnu and Sangnu. Thereafter these two groups are known as “Tangjan” and “Sangjan”.

Folk culture depicts the beauty of folk life and tradition. The fabric of folk culture has been spun with years from different customs, traditions and rituals of the day-to-day lives. Folk culture has been wonderfully classified by different thinkers in different ways.

Richard M. Dorson has outlined four broad sectors of folklore and folklife studies-

1. Oral Literature
2. Material Culture
3. Social Folk Customs
4. Performing Folk Arts

Events and festivals depict the culture of a tribe. Like any other tribe of the North Eastern India, the Wanchos hold a unique folk life depicted through their culture. For the convenience of the discourse, the events and festivals of the Wanchos, are classified into the following groups-

1. Agricultural
2. Chieftainal
3. Religious
4. Life-based

In this article, an attempt has been made to offer a discourse specifically on the events and festivals based on agriculture.

2. NEED FOR THE STUDY

The Assamese society and culture is a reflection of many different cultures and the contributions of the Wancho tribe in this aspect are huge and extensive. The traditional events and festivals, lifestyle, food habits, dance, dress etc have made the sphere of Assamese culture exquisite and extensive. However researches and discourses on the Wancho's traditional festivals and events available till date, cannot be considered sufficient. Therefore there is the need of a systematic study to bring to light the exquisite and extensive nature of the folk life of the Wanchos.

Objective of the study: To bring to light the unique identity of the Wanchos through the agricultural based festivals and events is the primary objective of the discourse. In relevance to this primary objective some other objectives are-

- To present the various agriculture based festivals and their times of celebration.
- To illuminate the ways of celebrating these customs and festivals traditionally.
- To study the possible contributions made by these festivals towards social integrity and coherence.

3. METHODS AND TECHNIQUES OF STUDY

In the presentation of this article titled 'Traditional Festivals and Events of the Wancho Tribe', the method used is mainly analytic. The sources of the method are both primary and secondary. Primary sources include field study, observation, interview and secondary sources include books, magazines, research letters, internet etc.

4. SPHERE OF THE STUDY

This article shall present a discourse on the agricultural based traditions and festivals of the Wancho tribe. Therefore, some villages of the Longding district of Arunachal Pradesh and Teokia Naga village of Assam have been taken into account.

5. AGRICULTURAL FESTIVALS AND EVENTS OF THE WANCHO

Like the various other tribes of the universe, the Wanchos are also rich in traditional festivals and customs. The Wancho life is mainly dependent on agriculture. And therefore their celebrations and festivals are primarily related to agriculture. The Wanchos mainly practice Jhum cultivation. From clearing lands for Jhum cultivation till the reaping of the harvest, they celebrate many different festivals. To seek blessings for a good harvest is the fundamental objective of the celebration of these festivals. The different such festivals celebrated during agricultural activities like clearing lands, burning forests, sowing, seeking of blessings, harvest reaping, etc. are as follows -

- Festival during clearing of lands for cultivation- 'Ka Khu Pap Uriya', 'Lau Jin Pa', 'Kalam', 'Chalo' etc.
- Festival during burning of forests- 'Sam-Gam'.
- Festivals during sowing- 'Ku-Ji-Ja', 'Wansala', etc.
- Festival for increasing production- 'Ka-Fum Uriya'.
- Festival during harvesting- Saawan Uriya, Saagam, etc.
- Festival during spring- Ojaiale or Oriya.

Festival during clearing of lands for cultivation (Slashing of forests) :

For Jhum cultivation, the Wanchos firstly select a plot of land and slash the forests practicing a specific festival. This festival has different names in different Wancho villages for instance in 'Wakka' village as 'Ka Khu Pap Uriya', 'Pongchao' village as 'Lau Jin Pa', 'Ninu' and Longkai village as 'Kalam' and Sasha village as 'Chalo'. This festival is celebrated between 10-15th January each year. The belief associated with this festival is fertility. For this purpose, they arrive at the cultivation land with a 'Purohit' and perform astrology on an egg. A horizontal bamboo trellis is prepared, where on wine prepared from an egg, a huge dry fish, some amount of cooked and uncooked rice are kept. After the rituals are over, the Purohit, the astrologer and the others present have a feast. The presence of one male from each of the family of the village in the ritual is mandatory. Thereafter, the forest slashing and clearing of the land take place. Apart from performing the rituals on the village head's land, the Wanchos perform them individually. They also take part in dance and music apart from field activities and feasting. They observe a ritual called 'Gena' on the next day of this festival.

Festival during burning of forest:

The festival celebrated during burning of forests for Jhum cultivation is called 'Sam Gam'. For maximum yielding and productivity, prayers are offered to deity 'Jogan' in this festival. The festival is celebrated both socially in the 'Mukhiyal's house and individually. It is celebrated on the month of February. On this day, each of the family presents a boar to the village head. Two purohits namely 'Gampa' and 'Ngopa' slaughter the boar. The 'Gangsa' class carry on the cooking activities. The Purohits along with the senior men of the village go to the field with meat, wine and rice and perform some rituals. Offerings like rice, meat and pieces of ginger are offered to deity 'Jogan'. After that the people enjoy feasting and start the burning of the forests. The next day 'Gena' is observed.

Festival during sowing:

The Wanchos celebrate a festival even during the sowing of seeds. The festival is known as 'Wansala' in Baanfera area and 'Kojija' in Longkai. To prevent any kind of waste of seeds is the primary cause of celebrating this festival. A male member of each family arrives at the field along with some paddy seeds and wine in a bamboo Culm. The wine is then spread over the seeds before sowing. They perform these rituals initially at the village head's field and then at the individual fields. Feasting is carried on thereafter. The youths then move to 'Morang' to participate in sports. On the next day, 'Gena' is observed.

Festival for increasing production:

The Wancho organize festivals for increasing the production. Such a festival organized by the Wanchos of Longkai during the month of June is known as Ka-Fum Uriya. The senior men of the village offer a hen and a boar to the deity Jogan in the farmer house built in the fields. The Purohit sacrifice the offerings followed by feasting and the celebration of 'Gena' on the next day.

Festival during Harvesting:

The festival celebrated by the Wanchos during harvesting has different names such as 'Savan Oriya' and 'Sagam'. It is celebrated towards the last of the month of August. This festival is celebrated for the proper preservation of the crops. For this they prepare perfect means of transportation such as baskets to carry the crops from the fields to their homes. These baskets are known as 'Satapkhau'. This is done by a male. With due respect to the village head, the Purohit slaughter a hen and a boar and sprinkle their blood on the crops. The Purohit, in this way conclude the religious rituals.

The slaughtered hen and the boar is brought to the village head's house for feasting by the men. The next day (Gena) is celebrated.

Festival during Spring (Ojaiale) :

A traditional agricultural festival celebrated by the Wanchos during Spring is Ojaiale. Increasing productivity is the main objective of this festival and also one of the primary annual celebrations. It is celebrated every year during the month of March or April under the fields during sowing of seeds. The music and dance culture observed during the festival gives us a clear hint of the belief of fertility implicit in the festival.

Ojaiale is celebrated for 5 to 7 days. The definite days or dates are decided by the village head through a discussion with the Purohit called 'Ngwapa' and the senior men of the village. The location is decided there forth. This venue is known as 'Tinglet Noi'. Tinglet meaning bold voice and Noi meaning place. The meaning of which is a place from where sounds could be boldly and clearly heard. While performing these rituals, the Purohit fixes some wild leaf called 'Hingrung' and takes the name of a deity called 'Jowawan Rung'. Then the preparation for the collections of wine, bear, hen, cow, buffallow etc. taken place.

The first day of Ojaiale is called 'Wandak'. On that day the young boys go to the forest to collect a big leafy bamboo and bring the same to the village before dawn. This bamboo which is the symbol of the festival is known as 'Rangwan'. The senior persons construct a bamboo fence (chang) in front of (Pannu Morang)- King's house and fix the Rangwan in between the Chang. The village head and the senior persons offer homemade wine to the deity 'Rangwan'. Then they leave for their homes for feasting and also entertain guests. On this day they do not participate on any kind of agricultural activities.

The second day of Ojaiale is known as 'Thoten'. On this day everyone slaughter boars, cows, a buffallows etc at their homes. Guests are entertained with meat and wine and feasting is carried on with full on fun.

The third day is known as 'Rengosia'. On this day the youth of the villages construct a bamboo chang in front of their respective 'Morangs'. On the other hand the seniors and the children offer wine in bamboo culms to the deity 'Jowawan Rang' to seek blessings for the crops. Thereafter they enjoy feasting in the 'Tongi' house.

On the fourth day everyone carries a large piece of the home slaughtered animals to the King's house and keep it in a definite place. After finishing this activity the total number of slaughtered animals in the entire village is counted. The Purohit offer wine, rice and meat prepared specially by the Queen to the deity under the Rangwan. Feasting is carried on in the Morang. Dance and music continues thereafter.

The fifth day is called 'Bosa'. The youths start the ritual of dancing from the Morangs. They enjoy meals from house to house. Thereafter the Purohits wear their traditional dresses and leave the Rangwan in the forest saying- 'Please don't curse us and its our custom to leave you here. Bless us with a good harvest'. Ojaiale concludes in this manner.

6. CONCLUSION

The article titled 'Traditional Festivals and Events of the Wancho Tribe' paves the way for the following conclusions-

- The Wancho celebrate various festivals from the selection of cultivable land to the harvesting of crops.
- Religious customs are associated with these festivals and the 'Purohit' class perform them.
- The custom of sacrifice is an integral part of these festivals. Cow, Buffalo, Boar, Hen, Rice, Wine etc. are offered to the deities.
- After the offerings to the deity, everyone enjoy feasting with meat, rice and wine.
- Music and Dance are an integral part of these agricultural festivals.
- The participation of each person in these festivals helps in the maintenance and continuance of the social customs and traditions.
- Along with the other festivals, the Wancho tribe celebrate various agricultural festivals following the tradition and culture. An observation of the customs and traditions while organizing and celebrating these events, gives us a clear idea that festivals are an integral part of the Wancho life. Religious connotations and folk beliefs are clearly implicit in these events and festivals. Though variations can be seen in the naming of these festivals in different Wancho inhabiting villages, yet there is a similarity in the customs and practice. These similarities weave the thread of integrity and solidarity among the Wanchos. These festivals have played a major role in keeping intact the beautiful unique identity of the Wancho tribe.

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