

rites and rituals of the Tutsa tribe of Arunachal Pradesh: A Critical Review of the Literature

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Abstract:

The Tutsa tribe of Arunachal Pradesh maintains a complex system of rites and rituals that shape its religious worldview, social organization, and ecological relationships. These ritual practices, rooted in indigenous cosmology and agrarian life, regulate interactions between humans, ancestral spirits, and natural forces. Despite their cultural importance, Tutsa rites and rituals have received limited focused scholarly attention, often appearing only marginally in broader ethnographic works on the tribes of Northeast India. This paper presents an extensive critical review of available literature on Tutsa ritual practices, examining agricultural rituals, life-cycle ceremonies, the role of ritual specialists, and recent transformation under Rangfraism and Christianity. By synthesizing ethnographic accounts, historical writings, and contemporary studies, the paper highlights thematic continuities, interpretative gaps, and methodological limitations within existing scholarship. The review demonstrates that Tutsa ritual systems remain under-theorized in existing scholarship and calls for focused, theory-informed and ethnographically grounded future research.

Keywords: Tutsa Tribe, rites and rituals, Indigenous religion, Rangfraism, ritual specialist, Arunachal Pradesh

1. Introduction

Arunachal Pradesh is home to 22 major tribes and 110 sub-tribes and is virtually a cultural mosaic of India. The northern slope of the Patkai mountain range is inhabited by six distinct ethnic groups. Of them, Wancho, Tangsa, Nocte, Tutsa, and Singpho form the major group. Often Tangsa, Tutsa, Wancho, and Nocte were classified under the generic term Naga. This common classification is due to similarities in their culture, as John Owen stated that “the habits and customs of these tribes assimilate in nearly every respect, and it will be unnecessary to treat them separately.” It was Dalton who made a distinction between the Nagas to the east and the Nagas to the west of the Dhunsiri River. This distinction was made on the basis of dialect spoken, polity, religion, and custom. These eastern Nagas are known as Patkai Nagas, a term given by Alexander Mackenzie because of their dwelling place on the slope of the Patkai hills. This group of Nagas are none other than the present-day Nocte, Wancho, Tutsa, Tangsa, and Lajo. This new appellation was given by Shri B. K. Borgohain, the then Political Officer of the tract. The main purpose of this new appellation was to distinguish these tribes from the Nagas of present Nagaland.

The Tutsa are scattered across Changlang and Tirap districts in Arunachal Pradesh. As per the 2011 Census (census of India, 2011), the total number of Tutsa villages in Changlang district is 22, with a population of 3,415, settled in the administrative circles of Yatdam, Khim Yong, and Namtok. In Tirap, the Tutsa are scattered in Bari Basap and Laju circles with a total population of 4,819. The term Tutsa is a combination of two words: ‘*Tut*’ is the name of a village in Tirap district, and ‘*Sa*’ means children. Thus, etymologically, Tutsa means ‘*children of Tut village*.’ The oral narratives of the Tutsa speak about a place called *Ronghon Sanchik*, presumed to be somewhere in northern Burma (now Myanmar), as their original homeland. From *Ronghon Sanchik*, the Tutsa migrated to Tut village. This happened probably around 1200

C.E. From Tut, they gradually spread to the Barap Valley, the main headwater of the Tirap River, in Tirap district.

According to N. R. Rao (2010), the main reason for the migration of the Tutsa was Burmese aggression, which compelled them to settle in the Patkai mountains. S. N. Barua (1991) suggests that the Tutsa originally belonged to the Southeast Asian region. They entered the Barap Valley from the Layo (Laju) Pass and became distributed in the territory of East Arunachal Pradesh.

The Tutsa tribe represents a lesser-documented indigenous community whose ritual life reflects a sophisticated interaction between nature worship, ancestral reverence, and community-based moral regulation. Traditionally, the Tutsa followed an indigenous belief system centered on *Rang Kothak*, the supreme deity, along with numerous spirits associated with forests, rivers, land, and ancestors. Rituals performed to appease these forces were considered essential for ensuring agricultural success, physical well-being, and social harmony.

This paper approaches Tutsa ritual practices through an analytical review framework that treats ritual not merely as symbolic performance but as a socially embedded system linking cosmology, authority, ecology, and moral order. Rather than offering a descriptive catalogue of ceremonies, the study evaluates how existing scholarship has interpreted Tutsa ritual life, what theoretical lenses have been used or neglected, and where major interpretive gaps remain. Such a focused review is necessary because Tutsa ritual traditions are frequently subsumed within broader Naga or Patkai tribal categories, resulting in conceptual underrepresentation in academic discourse.

2. Objectives of the Study

The present study is guided by the following objectives:

- To critically review existing literature on the rites and rituals of the Tutsa tribe
- To examine the role and authority of ritual specialists in Tutsa society
- To assess the transformation of ritual practices under Rangfraism and Christianity
- To identify gaps in existing scholarship and suggest directions for future research

3. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical methodology based entirely on secondary sources. The study draws upon books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, ethnographic accounts, doctoral theses, and credible institutional publications related to the Tutsa tribe and indigenous religions of Arunachal Pradesh. The collected materials were subjected to thematic analysis, focusing on patterns related to ritual types, functions, symbolism, and transformation. Rather than reproducing existing descriptions, the study synthesizes and critically evaluates interpretations offered by different scholars. As a literature review, the paper does not involve primary fieldwork; however, it emphasizes the need for future empirical studies to address existing gaps. As a critical literature review, this study does not aim at exhaustive bibliographic listing but at analytical synthesis. Priority has been given to works that contribute conceptual, ethnographic, comparative, or theoretical insight into ritual structure, priesthood, sacrifice, and religious change. Sources were evaluated not only for descriptive content but also for interpretive approach, analytical depth, and relevance to Tutsa ritual systems.

4. Indigenous Religious Worldview of Tutsa

Like other systems of indigenous religion, the Tutsa belief system consists of numerous myths and the propitiation of various deities. The worldview of the Tutsa is intimately connected to their religious beliefs and rituals. From the individual to the community, rituals play an important role in traditional Tutsa society. Tutsa rituals are performed by a specific non-hereditary group of people, the *Donthe* (the Tutsa shamans). In analytical terms, the *Donthe* may be understood as a ritual specialist combining the functions of diviner, healer, mediator, and ceremonial priest within the Tutsa religious system. There are different types of *Donthe*. Not all *Donthe* perform all kinds of rituals.

The Tutsa deities can be broadly divided into two groups on the basis of the nature of power attributed to them. The

Esotchi la represents the malevolent deities and spirits, while the *Eseychi la* represents the benevolent deities and spirits. According to Tutsa oral narratives, the origin of the *Esotchi la* goes like this: after the death of a person, their soul goes to *Wojum* (the ideal world of the dead; the nearest English equivalent could be the word “heaven”), but in cases of unnatural death, their *La* (soul) wanders between the sky and earth, and in this state the *La* (soul) takes the form of *Esotchi la*. The *Esotchi la* causes disease, crop failure, natural calamities, accidents, etc. A *Romtan/Sikhon* (ritual) and the offering of sacrifice are required to appease the spirit in order to stop or avoid such unnatural happenings.

Within the *Eseychi la* and *Esotchi la*, there are different kinds of spirits who may take different forms and represent forms of benevolent and malevolent power. They live in different natural habitats. For example, *Hakhosom* and *Hasom* (protectors of land) are benevolent spirits who look after the forest and agricultural crops. *Nok Changte* (spirit of the house) protects family members from diseases and natural calamities. *Hadang Bantey* (protector of the village) protects the village from external enemies and diseases.

Malevolent spirits such as *Ruthi* live in the forest. A person who comes under the attack of this spirit suffers from severe pain in the muscles. *Pongbang Mangjang* is the spirit that harms human beings. The Tutsa believe that this spirit takes the soul hostage after inducing unconsciousness. The *Donthe* performs a ritual known as *Talak* (a magical performance with green leaves) and identifies the location of the lost soul as well as the name of the spirit. After the necessary rituals, the person is retrieved from the forest. *Pongbang Mangjang* is similar to the idea of the deity *Yapom* prevalent in the belief system of the Tani group of tribes of central Arunachal Pradesh. Another notable malevolent spirit is *Pojhi Pak* or *Chongmang*. A person who comes under the attack of this spirit gets severe *Khosat* (headache) and *mokjeng* (unconscious talking).

The Tutsa regard all natural phenomena such as lightning, thunder, earthquakes, cyclones, and lunar and solar eclipses as consequences of the displeasure of the *Esotchi la*. Therefore, Tutsa rituals involve the sacrifice of animals and *kham* (rice beer) to the deities/spirits. Thus, the belief system of the Tutsa is based on the concept of propitiating these spirits through sacrifice.

The *Donthe* is the medium who communicates with the spirits and redresses the suffering of the people. There are different categories of priests such as *Tawa* (divinator), *Khowa* (intermediary between the spiritual and human world), and *Shikwa* (the priest who performs all the religious rites and rituals). However, the common term for all categories of priests is *Donthe*. The process of rites, rituals, sacrifices, the success of festivals, and the kinds of ceremonies are decided by the priest. A bamboo altar is made in order to begin the ritual, and animals like cows, pigs, and cocks are sacrificed as prescribed by the priest. The ritual may last for an hour or even a day, and during the course of such ceremonies the priest chants a lengthy ballad. This chanting is important because it tells the history of the Tutsa community. Tutsa priests are not hereditary.

The rites and rituals are an important aspect of Tutsa society. The idea of the welfare of the family, clan, community, and prosperity is based on rites and rituals. For example, one of the important rituals of the Tutsa is *Harong*, which is of two types: *Hadang Harong*, which is performed for the protection of the village community, and *Chamwe Harong*, which is performed to boost the harvest. Rites relating to the naming of a newborn, funeral, and marriage are some of the important aspects relating to an individual's life. The rite of naming a newborn is performed in the house of the *Eho* (maternal uncle). The *Eho* puts ginger on the neck of the baby. This rite is known as *Chingjek*. This rite establishes the everlasting relationship between the *Eho* and *Dek* (cousin). This rite indicates the role and position of the *Eho* in the reckoning of Tutsa kinship.

Another important rite is associated with funerals. When a person dies, a part of the deceased's hair is removed and preserved by the family. This rite is known as *Khoron Ton*. The preserved hair can only be disposed of during the festival of *Ronghon Kuk* (agricultural festival), celebrated during the months of June and October. The rite of *Khoron Ton* reflects how Tutsa beliefs attach an individual's fate to that of the larger good of the community.

Another notable ritual is associated with *Tangjong* (literally “the stone”). *Tangjong* is believed to be the protector of the Tutsa village. According to myths current among Tutsa elders, no enemy can enter their villages so long as the watchful eyes of *Tangjong* keep alerting the villagers about any unfriendly intrusion. However, the ritual associated with *Tangjong* is not performed by the *Donthe* but by a selected family. For example, in Katang village the ritual is performed by the *Kuma* clan, and in Jongpho village by the *Kanglom* clan. Preliminary surveys of the oral narratives of Tutsa elders suggest that rituals related to *Tangjong* date back many generations. This ritual was already performed by the people when they had settled in the first Tutsa village, *Tut* (in Barap Valley in Tirap district). Precisely when and where the concept of *Tangjong* emerged among the Tutsas can only be established through detailed study. From an analytical perspective, this dual classification of benevolent and malevolent spirits, along with propitiatory sacrifice and mediated ritual communication, reflects structural features commonly identified in anthropological theories of animism, shamanism, and functional ritual systems.

5. Literature Review

The existing literature relevant to Tutsa ritual life may be broadly grouped into five categories: colonial ethnographic writings, administrative and gazetteer records, regional tribal histories, comparative anthropological and ritual theory works, and contemporary studies on religious transformation movements. While each category contributes partial insight, none provides a sustained, Tutsa-centered ritual analysis.

Dalton (1872), in *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, describes the North-East Frontier tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley. Dalton mentions that the Nagas have no temples and priests, but the Nagas of lower Assam living between the *Doyang* and *Kopili* rivers performed sacrifices to various spirits. Given the fact that the tribes of East Arunachal Pradesh now living in the districts of Tirap, Changlang, and Longding, of which the Tutsa are a part, were ethnologically clubbed

under the generic term Naga, our understanding of Tutsa rites and rituals is not helped by Dalton's seminal work. Reid (1983) wrote, *History of the Frontier Area Bordering on Assam from 1883–1941*, which is based on official government records. There is no detailed description of the beliefs and rituals of the people of the region in the book. Choudhury (1980) edited *Gazetteer of India: Arunachal Pradesh, Tirap District* and mentioned various aspects of the religious life of neighbouring tribes. According to him, all the residing tribes were nature worshippers. The Nocte, for example, are reported as believers in the existence of a Supreme Being whom they named *Jauban* or *Tesong*. Due to the Vaishnavite movement in Assam, they came under the influence of Hinduism. The work also mentions sacrificial rituals associated with religion. However, the volume of the gazetteer fails to mention the rites and rituals of the Tutsa tribe. Barua (1991), in *Tribes of the Indo-Burma Border*, does not mention the religious beliefs of the Tutsa. However, Barua speaks about the Vaishnavite movement in East Arunachal Pradesh. The author provides an account of the historical prelude, geography, racial account, social behaviour, national integration, and the impact of the Second World War in the region.

Rao (2006), in *Tribal Culture, Faith, History and Literature*, gives a comprehensive account of the geography and political history of the Tirap Valley and the Patkai region. The work also discusses various stages in the life of an individual, such as birth, marriage, divorce, and death, along with ceremonies and rituals. However, changes in the traditional belief system are not properly mentioned.

Rao, (2010), discusses the history, geography, sociology, and anthropology of the Tutsa tribe. The author also mentions the migration of the Tutsa from *Ronghon Sanchik* and their settlement in Tut village. The second part of the book highlights festivals and religious structure among the Tutsa. However, the author fails to give detailed discussion on rites and rituals, their changes and continuity, as well as the specific role of religious priests such as *Donthe* and *Howa*.

Leach, (1954), discusses the concept of supernatural beings and the function of religious priests among the Kachin. The Kachin believe that illness in humans and disease in crops and animals is due to attacks by supernatural beings, which they call Nat. Therefore, they sacrifice domestic livestock to the concerned spirits. The sacrificial ritual is performed by the *Dumsa* (priest). The overall sacrificial ritual is similar to that of the Tutsa. Leach's work offers a viable model for studying Tutsa society and religion, as the subject of his enquiry shares similarities with the Tutsa.

Mills, (1922), gives a detailed description of the Lhota Naga. According to the author, the Lhota were animists and did not believe in a supreme being who rewards the good and punishes the evil, but they worshipped spirits such as *Sityingo* (lord of wild animals), *Okisityingo* (House *Sityingo*), and *Ngazo* (the spirit of the jungle). They have their own priest known as *Puthis*.

Fürer-Haimendorf (1939), provide an ethnographic profile of various Naga tribes when they were living in relative isolation. Since Tutsa rites and rituals are similar to those of other Naga tribes, this book can be an important source for mapping Tutsa ritual practices and for comparative analysis.

Carter (2006), discusses sacrifice and various theories associated with it. The author discusses the meaning of sacrifice and the main reasons behind sacrificial practices. In one of the articles in the book, Jan van Baal defines offering as an act of presenting something to a supernatural being. According to him, sacrifice is a form of gift-giving through which human beings communicate with the divine. This book helps in understanding Tutsa rites and rituals.

Durkheim (1995), critically analyzes what he considers the simplest and most archaic forms of religion. Durkheim defines religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is, things set apart and forbidden. He argues that so-called primitive religions should be respected because they fulfil the same needs and play the same role as more complex religions.

Harvey (2002), which discusses indigenous religions. In one article in the volume, "Witchcraft and Healing among the Bangwa of Cameroon" by F. Bowie discusses notions of witchcraft and healing practices. Another article, "Gift for the Sky People" by Mark R. Woodward, discusses sacrificial practices among Naga and other Southeast Asian indigenous groups. Malinowski (1948), discusses ritual practices among so-called primitive societies. He describes beliefs regarding the spirit of the dead among the Trobriand Islanders and explains the functional link between behaviour, belief, and society. Jones (1968), discusses similarities and differences in shamanism in North India and tribal areas of Middle India and the North East Frontier Agency (Arunachal Pradesh). Among such tribes, the shaman is a medium and an expert in the affairs of the other world. The shaman acts as healer, curer of disease, and mediator between human beings and the world beyond.

Goody (2010), discusses myth and ritual practices among the *Lo Dagaa* and *Gonja* societies of northern Ghana. This book is helpful for understanding traditional culture and ritual structure in tribal societies. Joy (2014), discusses traditional religion, rites, and gods of the Tangkhul community. The ancestral religion of the Tangkhul is known as *Hao*. The author also mentions the influence of Christianity among the Tangkhul.

Riba (2005), discusses rites and ritual practices of the Abo Tani group of Arunachal Pradesh. The author mentions the role of *Nyibo* (priest) as an intermediary between the human and spiritual world and notes changes in ritual practices due to modernization.

Barkataki-Rushcheweyh (2015) examines the emergence of Rangfraism. This article is helpful for understanding the emergence of Rangfraism among the Tangsa community and discusses Tangsa origin and migration. Rangfraism refers to a recent movement toward the institutionalization and reformulation of indigenous religious belief and practice among certain Patkai-region tribes, emphasizing doctrinal consolidation, ritual standardization, and identity assertion.

Majumdar (1995) discusses Tangsa society, polity, and food habits. The work also highlights food restrictions during rites, rituals, and festivals. Dabi (2017), describes traditional healing practices among the Galo tribe. The author describes the *Nyub* (priest) as central to ritual life and also notes the decline in priestly authority due to modernization. This article is useful for comparative understanding of the Tutsa Donthe and changes in their role.

Madan (2011), describes major religions of India from sociological and historical perspectives. However, the author does not provide a detailed anthropological theory of tribal religion.

Harvey (2002), which contains recent scholarly articles focusing on religious activities and indigenous knowledge, including divination, healing, shamanism, and magic. This volume is useful for widening perspectives on indigenous religion.

Bose (1994), discusses the influence of Hindu religion on tribal populations. This work helps in understanding how tribal culture and customs are sometimes influenced by other cultures and provides a framework to study Tutsa interaction with neighboring plains populations, especially in religious exchange and influence. Mandelbaum (1972), argues that Indian society continually adapts to change. The book discusses agents of social change such as social mobility, religion, and tribal movements, which are useful for analysing continuity and change in Tutsa ritual practices.

Taken together, the existing literature reveals a pattern: while regional and comparative studies provide useful contextual parallels, Tutsa ritual life itself remains under-analyzed at a focused level. Much of the available writing is descriptive, administrative, or comparative rather than interpretive and Tutsa-specific. Detailed ritual process analysis, chant documentation, symbolic interpretation, and priestly authority structures are rarely examined in depth. This indicates a clear need for theoretically informed and ethnographically grounded Tutsa-centered ritual studies.

6. Conclusion

This critical review of the literature reveals that the rites and rituals of the Tutsa tribe constitute a rich, coherent, and dynamic religious system that integrates cosmology, ecology, social organization, and moral regulation. Existing scholarship, though scattered and often indirect, clearly indicates that Tutsa ritual life is not merely a set of symbolic practices but a central mechanism through which social order, agricultural prosperity, health, and collective well-being are maintained. The indigenous worldview of the Tutsa, structured around the dual categories of benevolent (*Eseychi la*) and malevolent (*Esochi la*) spirits, demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of causality, balance, and human–nature relationships.

The literature further establishes the pivotal role of ritual specialists, collectively known as *Donthe*, who function as mediators between the human and spiritual realms. Their non-hereditary status, ritual expertise, healing practices, and custodianship of oral traditions underscore a flexible yet authoritative religious structure. Comparative studies with other Naga groups, Kachin society, and tribes of central Arunachal Pradesh suggest strong regional patterns of animistic belief, sacrificial logic, and shamanic mediation, while also highlighting distinctive Tutsa features such as the *Tangjong* cult, *Harong* rituals, and kinship-based rites like *Chingjek* and *Khoron Ton*.

At the same time, the review exposes significant limitations in existing scholarship. Early colonial and administrative writings largely subsumed the Tutsa under generic Naga categories, resulting in the marginalization of their specific ritual practices. Later ethnographic works, though more focused, tend to provide descriptive accounts without sustained theoretical engagement or attention to processes of change. The impact of Rangfraism and Christianity on Tutsa ritual life remains particularly underexplored and is often treated as peripheral to broader discussions on religious transformation in Arunachal Pradesh. Moreover, there is a noticeable absence of micro-level, village-based studies that document ritual performance, priestly chants, symbolism, and lived religious experiences.

When interpreted through major ritual theories, Tutsa practices reveal analytically significant patterns. In Durkheimian terms, collective rituals such as *Harong* function as mechanisms of social cohesion and moral solidarity. From a Malinowskian perspective, propitiatory sacrifice and healing rites operate as responses to uncertainty, risk, and misfortune management. Leach's model of priestly mediation helps explain the institutional role of the *Donthe* as a negotiator between cosmological and social orders. These theoretical correspondences indicate that Tutsa ritual systems are not merely descriptive ethnographic phenomena but analytically rich structures suitable for broader comparative religion discourse. In conclusion, the rites and rituals of the Tutsa tribe represent an intellectually significant yet under-researched domain within the anthropology and history of indigenous religions in Northeast India. A more rigorous, theoretically informed, and empirically grounded engagement with Tutsa ritual life will not only fill a major gap in regional scholarship but also contribute meaningfully to wider discussions on indigenous religion, cultural continuity, and social transformation.

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