

Religion and Religious Conversion Among the Riang of Tripura

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Abstract: Religion plays an important role in shaping a person identity, beliefs, values and sense of belonging. Tribal Communities in India have distinct beliefs that are rooted in their traditional origins and stories. The Riang tribe, predominantly inhabitants of Tripura, with small populations found in the States of Mizoram and Assam. They belonged to the mongoloid group and speaks language 'Kau Bru', which is part of the the tibeto-burman language family. The Riangs are semi-nomadic tribe and traditionally practice shifting cultivation also known as jhum (slash and burn). Animism is a primary traditional belief of the Riang Community. This paper attempts to study the traditional beliefs of Riang community that have changed with the adoption of Christianity and Hinduism. Furthermore, this paper explores more how they have managed to blend their old practices with new religious influence.

Keywords: Riang, Religion, Priest (Aukchai), Physician (Boido), Ritual, Conversion

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Introduction

The Riang are basically a semi-nomadic tribe of Tripura who practice jhum (slash and burn) or shifting method of cultivation. They belonged to the mongoloid group and speak 'Kau Bru', which is a part of the tibeto-burmese language group. The Riang also call themselves as Bru denoting 'community'. Emile Durkheim stated religion as "an integral, fundamental, and inseparable part of human society and life". Religion plays active role in holding society together, providing a shared sense of purpose

and meaning that is rooted in its beliefs, values, and traditions. Man and religion have been closely linked for ages. Tribal religions are frequently described as animism, polytheism, and totemism. However, with the spread of Christianity and the influence of Hinduism, these traditional practices have undergone significant transformation, leading to a blending or partial replacement of earlier animistic and totemic traditions. Over time, various religions have emerged, leading many people to convert from their previous faith. Religious conversion has a significant impact on the social and cultural aspects of tribal communities, often introducing a new religious identity. The Riang also has gone through significant transformations, shifting away from their traditional animist practices as they adopted different belief systems. This change has led to a decline in their ancestral customs, as they increasingly incorporated elements from other cultures and religions. The introduction of Christianity, Hinduism, or other religions has likely played a role in shaping the tribe (Riang) spiritual beliefs and practices.

Traditional Religion and Belief of the Riang

The Riang tribe traditional religion rooted in animism¹ attributing spiritual significance to a wide range of natural elements and objects. They worship those objects by offering sacrifices.² The Riang faith can be described as polytheistic, characterized by the worship of multiple deities and spirits.³ It is rightly written by Jagadish Gan Choudhury about the Riang traditional belief that ‘*the religion of the Reang contains elements of animism, magic, taboo and witchcraft. They believe that different deities are but local manifestations of one and the same almighty God.*’⁴

They use the term “*mtai ktor*” to call their supreme God. They also have different names for their local deities like *tuima* (goddess of water), *lampra* (goddess of family), *mainouhma* (goddess of paddy), *khunouhma* (goddess of cotton). Their deities don’t have particular picture but usually worship through symbols like bamboo poles or sometimes objects like stone or rock.⁵ However, the Christians, usually prefer to use *Kchusoyang*⁶ for God.

The supreme god also entrusted other deities with the responsibility of upholding and enforcing the traditional social customs among the Riang people.⁷ The wife of the supreme god (Achu Sibrai) was also believed to have tore her garments into three pieces and distributed them, along with garland and earrings, as tokens of allegiance. As a result, the Riang people are referred to as “*Surjo Bongsi Maladhara*,”⁸ which refers to the tribe that wears the sacred necklace known in *Kau Bru* as “*Rangbauh*.”⁹ The Riang traditional religion is marked by a strong belief in supernatural powers. They believe in both benevolent deities and malevolent deities. Benevolent deities are believed to be kind, protective, and beneficial. The Riang often worship and offer sacrifices to these deities to seek their blessings and protection.

They also believed in the land inhabited by spirits, either benevolent or malevolent. If they believe that a land is possessed by evil spirits, they abandoned the land to avoid any potential harm. This shows their deep respect for the supernatural powers and their desire to live in harmony with nature. In an effort to appease the spirits and seek their blessings, the community perform ceremonial offerings, for which they rely on the guidance of *Aukchai* (traditional priest), who has deep knowledge of ancient rituals and customs. The *Aukchai* plays significant role who not serve as spiritual leader but also acting as a traditional physician or ‘*Boido*’, who provides healing and medical guidance to the villagers.

The Role of Aukchai (Traditional Priest) and Boido (Physician)

In Riang Community, the Aukchai plays a pivotal role in healing and spiritual practices. As a priest, he performs rituals to cure illnesses, often involving animal sacrifices. His services are often sought by individual families and community at large to perform ceremonial offering and other rituals be it naming child after birth, ritual related to marriage or funeral rites and so on, highlighting his integral position in Riang cultural and spiritual life.¹⁰ The Riang community's major life-cycle rituals, from birth to death, are overseen by the Aukchai. Beyond spiritual duties, the Priest also serves as a healer, utilizing knowledge of medicinal herbs and spiritual incantations to treat ailments. The role of Aukchai is not reserved for specific families as it is not hereditary and anyone who is capable and wishes to learn the craft of priest can become Aukchai. Some of the well-known Riang priests (aukchai) were Langkati Duari (only Reang female known priestess), Sungthang Nungthang (1837-1932), Birbahadur (1901-1975), Tanggrangrai(1906-1981) ,¹¹ Sunthamuntha, Napouhha, Amaniya, Tongnang Aukchai etc.¹² Boido (physician) also known as traditional healer is another remarkable individual in Riang Society who is known for healing sickness. They believe illnesses are caused by offended malevolent spirits, so the healer's role is to determine the root cause and prescribed remedies. This involves communicating with spirits and using magic and divination. Healers learn their craft through apprenticeship with senior practitioners, mastering the use of herbal medicines and rituals. They claim to treat various ailments, including fever, stomach issues, and skin diseases. Some believe these healers can also counteract harm caused by others, who allegedly insert foreign objects into victims' bodies.¹³ In Riang villages, witches, locally known as 'Skal', are believed to cause various illnesses. A skal is someone who has mastered harmful mantras and uses them to afflict others. When someone falls ill, women are often suspected of being skal and may face social exclusion or violence.¹⁴ Additionally, some people are believed to have "evil eyes" that can curse others, especially during meals. If someone with an evil eye looks at another person eating, it's thought to cause "khuanangmo," leading to various health issues. Only traditional healers like Aukchai and Boido are believed to have the power to counteract these curses. They use their knowledge and spiritual powers to heal those affected by evil eyes or Skal's harmful magic.¹⁵

Ceremonial Rituals of Riang

The Religious life and spiritual practices of Riang community are deeply intertwined with their life cycle, marked by various ceremonies and festivals aimed at appeasing supernatural forces and seeking divine blessings. Throughout their lives, the Riang observe a range of ceremonies that correspond to significant life events, such as birth, marriage, and death. These rituals play a pivotal role in their cultural and religious identity.

Before and After Birth of a Child

- (i) **Gbeing Bumo-** It is a ritual performed during the pregnancy for proper formation of the baby's physical structure and for the successful delivery of the baby.
- (ii) **Tui Chao-** In this ritual the intestine of fowl is offered as sacrifice at child-birth near a village stream in which water deity is asked for good health of the baby.

- (iii) ***Aabu Sumo***- This ritual is performed after the umbilical cord of the child is properly healed for the purification and naming of the child by sacrificing five fowls and placing five local rice brewed wine bottles(arag).
- (iv) ***Bachak Kamo***- It is a ritual observed after the baby turn 4-5 months, for the good health of the child by sacrificing five fowls and placing five to six of local rice brewed wine.
- (v) ***Khong Khok Kamo***- This ritual is performed for the growth of the child brain and long life. For this ritual, the woman will have to wear a new cloth and sacrifice one fowl and one cock. She will also have to offer 60-70 local rice brewed wine to the priest.
- (vi) ***Saja Thunairao/ Saroi Thunairao***- This ritual is performed for the well being of the child. It is performed by sacrificing two fowls and one pig.¹⁶

Rituals During Marriage

- (i) ***Songrongma Ritual***- It is a ritual performed during the main ceremony of the marriage where one fowl and one cock along with two local rice brewed wine are offered.¹⁷
- (ii) ***Kati Chamo***- This ritual is performed after the bride was brought to the bridegroom house. It was usually performed both on the land and in water by sacrificing two fowls or in some case one goat. This ritual is basically for a new couple after marriage.¹⁸

Rituals Relating to Death

- (i) ***Yaphaik ou, tao buthaik ou***- For lao tao (owner of the death) and for the death person.
- (ii) ***Sampli Bahcha ou***- In this ritual, the villagers would be drinking and dancing whole night by taking the dress of biangoma (puranic bird called Garuda). Thereafter, a small hut (Smang Nough) would be built where the bone of death person will be kept for 3-4 months. Another small hut (kaa nough) is also built for the older women for weeping. And for the rich people like chudri of the village, their bones will be kept in a special hut called chrai nough.¹⁹

Rituals Related to Cultivation

The Riang traditional method of cultivation is shifting cultivation (slash and burn); jhum or huh. The cultivation is associated with various beliefs and rituals to appease deities and evoke protection and good harvest. Some of the rituals related to agricultural practices are as follows:

- (i) ***Uakhar Kaimo***:-A ritual is performed when selecting a site for cultivation. A small patch of the tentatively selected site is cleared to perform the ritual to Achu Sibrai. A lump of soil is also taken from that land by the family's head and placed below his pillow. If he has a dream of buffalo, cattle, clear water, fishing, marriage, etc.,²⁰ jhum cultivation in that land will be profitable.
- (ii) ***Hatamalaimi***: This ritual is conducted after burning the slashed trees at the jhum site before the crops were grown. Two pigs, one goat and three chickens are sacrificed to deities like Tuibuma, Songrongma, Bonirao, Buraha, Mainouhma and Khuluma.²¹ It was performed for the rich harvest and protection.

- (iii) **Maikhlummo:** This ritual was performed to the deities of crops in order to increase the productivity of the jhum cultivation. It was performed in front of the temporary hut called *kaireing*.²²
- (iv) **Chechema Phohmo:** As jhum cultivation is almost entirely dependent on rainfall, a ritual was performed in the case of drought. The goddess of water, called *Tuibuma*, is worshipped. A lump of soil is thrown into the water, a particular insect called *Chechema* (Cricket) is buried alive with the head downward, and a sound in imitation of a frog is produced by rubbing a *laisra* leaf (*phrynium imbricatum*) against the bottom of a basket.²³
- (v) **Badia-maibasami:** *Badia-mai* is a particular type of rice grown in the jhum; *basami* means ‘carrying’. The Riang cut the first bunch of this paddy carried it on their back, and performed a ritual before harvesting.²⁴
- (vi) **Maiktachamo:** This ritual is performed after the harvest. The Riang does not use the new rice unless this ritual is performed.

Other major rituals include family rituals or *nouhkhoh* ritual, village ritual and rituals for public welfare.

Influence of Hinduism on Riang Traditional Religion

The Riang traditional deities show similarities with Hindu gods and goddesses. For instance, *Mailuhma*, the rice goddess, and *Khuluhma*, the cotton goddess, are often associated with *Laxmi*, while *Tuibuma*, the water goddess, is likened to *Ganga*. The influence of Vaishnavism and Hinduism has significantly impacted the Riang worship practices, leading to a perceived connection between their ancient religious traditions and Hinduism. The community performs rituals to deities like *Buraha* (*Sibrai*) and *Lampra*, who is considered powerful and analogous to *Shiva*. They have also constructed several temples dedicated to *Shiva* and *Krishna*, with Riang priests leading the ceremonies. Devotional singing, such as *Kirtan*, is also an integral part of their worship. Notably, most of Riangs, excluding those who identify as Christian, consider themselves Hindu, reflecting the community’s adoption of Hindu traditions.²⁵

Role of Christianity in Shaping the Riang Religious Landscape

In the recent years in India, most of the conversion to Christianity takes place among the tribal groups. The Christian missionaries work among the tribals by giving them social services like education and medical aid. The tribal community also tend to accept Christianity as they have the desire to improve their economic condition. As a result, in different parts of India, tribal community groups have adopted Christianity in the last hundred and fifty years.²⁶ They still give services to tribal community like health facilities, activities for improving the economic condition, make efforts to eradicate poverty and run orphanages besides removing illiteracy establishing and running education institutes for educational development. And such efforts are still going on even today which make the religious conversion became simpler and easy and extensive as time passed. As *Vidyarthi* and *Ray* note, as per an estimate 1/6 of the total Christian population in India is tribals. The main centralization of tribal Christians has been in the North-East Himalayan area.²⁷ In Tripura, the percentage of Christians among the

Scheduled Tribe (ST) population has increased from 5% in 1991 to 13% currently. The Tripuri group is the largest tribal group in Tripura, followed by the Rieng and then the Jamatia. These three groups make up about 75% of the state's tribal population. Among the Christians in these tribes, 57% belong to one of these three groups. While fewer than 9% of the Tripuri and Jamatia groups are Christian, about 17.2% of the Rieng tribe identifies as Christian.²⁸

The year 1890 signaled a significant turning point in Tripura's Christian history as the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society (NZBMS) initiated its work, beginning with Brahmanbaria near Agartala, and paving the way for a new era of growth and development. The New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society also played a key role in establishing Tripura Baptist Christian Union (TBCU), which was formed in the meeting held on 3rd and 4th December, 1938. The objective behind forming TBCU is to bring all the Christians of Tripura under one roof.²⁹ Other Christian denominations also engaged in missionary work in Tripura, bringing impact on their traditional ways of life. As a result, many age-old practices, such as superstitions and animal sacrifices, gave way to the principles of Christianity. Though the introduction of Christianity to Tripura took place through Jesuit Missionaries, during the reign of Maharaja Amar Manikya (1577-1585 A.D.) but its adoption by the Rieng Community occurred much later, in 1922, when Khua Rai took baptism. Later more evangelistic works took place from 1926 onwards.

Christianity came to the Rieng community during a time of turmoil, sparked by Ratnamoni's 1942-43 uprising. Ratnamoni, a leader of the Rieng community then, he introduced a new formed religion, but was falsely accused of plotting Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya. The Maharaja hearing this sent troops to attack them, killing 7 people, including a pregnant woman. Ratnamoni's followers, seeking refuge, encountered missionaries from the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society (NZBMS). The missionaries offered them help and shelter, and eventually, the promise of continued support if they converted to Christianity.³⁰ Christianity has brought significant changes to the Rieng tribe's way of life. They now prioritize prayer over animal sacrifices and no longer worship natural objects. The role of traditional healers (*boido*) has decreased as they rely more on medicines provided by the missionaries. The community slowly shifted from relying on traditional priest (*aukchai*) to church workers for guidance and support.³¹ The church has now become a powerful institution that reshaped the cultural and spiritual landscape of the Rieng tribe, replacing traditional practices with new values and beliefs.

Emergence of New Religion

A new religious movement named as Ram Mondoli of Soito Sonaton Dormo has emerged among the Rieng community, led by Monuram Molsoi, which blends traditional beliefs with modern practices. This movement, founded on January 14, 1990, in Hnahthialzawl Para, Mamit district, Mizoram, aims to unite the Reang people and preserve their cultural heritage. Molsoi's initiative seeks to break free from the influence of other dominant communities and religions, which he believes have oppressed the Reang. The new religious form emphasizes devotion and worship without sacrifices, focusing on the supreme deity Sonaton, symbolized by Salampata. By reviving and reinterpreting traditional Reang beliefs, this movement provides a sense of identity and unity for the community.³²

Impact of Conversion: A Problem or Catalyst for Positive Change

Religious Conversion to Christianity or other faith can be seen as complex issue for tribal Communities, often leading to a perceived departure from their cultural identity. Conversion can sometime be seen as a source of conflict among tribal communities, creating divisions between those who have traditional beliefs and those who have adopted new religion.³³ The Tribals have undergone a significant cultural changes, embracing Western styles and practices, including clothing, marriage customs, and other aspects of daily life, often at the expense of their traditional ways.³⁴ With the Conversion to Christianity there has been decline of traditional tribal culture, like changes in the tribal Youth-houses, Panchayats, traditional folk dances, festivals and values among other things. Their original culture has declined and a new life style as well as new cultural processes has emerged.

While conversion has brought significant changes to the Riang community's social life, it has also had a positive impact. The introduction of schools by missionaries has provided access to education, which paved the way for overall development and progress in the tribe. The establishment of St. Paul's School in 1943 was a turning point, offering affordable hostel facilities for rural students at a affordable fee. This enabled children from remote villages to access high school education and obtain a degree, paving the way for future opportunities.³⁵ The impact of external religions like Christianity and Hinduism has brought social significant changes, but the Riang community remains deeply rooted in their traditional practices. They have managed to preserve their cultural heritage despite the influence of other religions. The interconnected nature of tribal societies makes it difficult to distinguish between different aspects of their lives, including politics, economy, religion, and social norms.³⁶ The converts renegotiate festivals like *boisu* which is an important annual festival of Riang, in this occasion all family get together and celebrate by making traditional rice cake- *awaing* and they also perform dance *tao toi khangmo* where children continue dance from door to door to collect egg and other meal.³⁷ Though those who have converted may not perform sacrificial rite but they still observe this festival by retaining dances/songs as "culture" while reframing sacrificial rites.³⁸ *The Riang community has found a balance between modernization and tradition, retaining key aspects of their customs and practices even as they have adopted a new faith. This blend of old and new allows them to stay connected to their roots while moving forward.*

Conclusion

The Riang community has undergone significant religious transformations, with many adopting Hinduism and others converting to Christianity. These external influences have brought about notable changes in their traditional practices and beliefs. However, despite these shifts, they have managed to preserve certain aspects of their cultural heritage. Even among Christian converts, some traditional elements like attire (e.g. *rnai*) are still incorporated into important ceremonies like weddings. This blending of old and new reflects the community's ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity, ultimately shaping their distinct identity. Overall, their religious identity remains a dynamic blend of traditional heritage and modern influences, evolving through ongoing interactions between the two.

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