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Rituals of Desire and Fertility: Cultural Symbolism in Bas Puja and Hudum Deo Puja among the Koch-Rajbongshi Community

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Abstract

Assam is among the seven sisters of north-eastern India, is home to a rich tapestry of ethnic, tribal, and religious communities, each sustaining unique cultural practices and belief systems. Among these, the Koch-Rajbongshi tribe's rituals provide a distinct prospect into the symbolic expression of fertility and desire. This research paper will critically discuss both the Bas puja and Hudum Deo puja of the Koch-Rajbongshi tribe by grounding a multidisciplinary theoretical framework drawing from ritual theory, anthropology of sexuality, and performance studies. It will critically evaluate why sexuality and fertility are ritualized rather than hidden. In both rituals, phallic symbols are used in the form of bamboo poles, banana stems, erotic songs, and dances. The folk community praises the phallus, which symbolizes strength, sexuality, continuity, and fertility. These erotic symbols and erotic dance postures in sacred rituals can be critically analysed, where sexual union and desire are mirrored as cosmic creation, reinforcing fertility among the Koch-Rajbongshi. Both the rituals are specifically gendered performances of fertility; only male members celebrate the Bas puja/Madan Kamdev puja, and the Hudum Deo puja is a rain-invoking, women-centric ceremony. Both the pujas' challenges Sanskritic religious morality by centering female ritual authority and sexual openness as sacred necessity.

Key word: Tribal rituals, fertility, desire, cultural symbolism, and sexuality.

Introduction

"It was a time when bodies made a display of themselves" (Foucault,1)

Assam is a place with a diverse range of identities, traditions, and beliefs, all of which add to the rich fabric of its social and cultural landscape. Numerous ethnic groups, tribal communities, and religious traditions, each with its own unique customs, rituals, festivals, and traditional values, may be found in Assam, which is tucked away in north-eastern India. These diverse groups, which range from the Bodos, Misings, Karbis, Koch-Rajbongshis and Rabhas to the Ahoms, Tea-tribe communities, and indigenous Assamese Brahmins, speak several languages from several linguistic families and hold

different worldviews that have been created over centuries of interaction and civilization. Assamese festivals and ceremonies express strong ties to the natural world, agriculture, spirituality, communal life, fertility, and sexuality. In many Indian indigenous and regional religious traditions, fertility and desire-related rituals play a major role. Bas puja also known as Madan Kamdev worship and Hudum Deo puja, two culturally prominent activities in Assam and North Bengal, provide powerful insights into the symbolic expression and ritualistic enactment of desire and fertility. Hudum Deo puja is a living folk ceremony that is mostly done by women to call forth rain and agricultural abundance, while the Madan Kamdev puja or Bas puja are renowned for their sensual sculptures connected to divine love and human reproduction. When these customs are examined collectively, it becomes clear how ritualised desire and romantic symbolism serve as potent cultural tools for maintaining community, land, and life. This paper will critically discuss these two prominent and unique rituals of Koch-Rajbongshi tribe and how both the festivals express fertility and desire through song, music, and erotic dance movements.

The Koch-Rajbongshi community is an ethnic community found in lower Assam and North Bengal, with a presence in some parts of Nepal, Bangladesh, and Bhutan. One unique factor that makes this community different is that their cultural and ritualistic practices are an amalgamation of tribal, folk, and Hindu ritualistic elements, which shows a deep connection with Shaivism and Shaktism. Both Baas puja and Hudum Deo puja are symbolically related and celebrate the idea of procreation, fertility, and expression of desire. Bas puja is local and tribal expression to the fertility and procreation which quite similar to the sacred idea of shiv linga in Shaivism.

Bas puja, also known as Madan-kam, is a very popular and important ritual of the folk community. Bas puja, literally meaning bamboo worship, is actually a round shape decorated with red cloths and celebrated with songs, dances, and other rituals. The decorated bamboo is believed to represent the god Madan-kam, also known as Kamdev in Hindu mythology. The form of the deity, which is a bamboo, resembles the erect penis, and it apparently makes it clear that the Bas puja is a ritual of fertility rite that worships the phallus that symbolizes the male generative power. A similar idea is seen in Hinduism, in the form of Shiv linga puja. Phallus worship in India is most prominently associated with Siva worship through the linga. Even though it is occasionally misinterpreted as merely phallus worship. Hinduism sees it in a more philosophical way, as a cosmic energy that is the creative, boundless, formless character of Brahman (reality).

Beyond the physical form and symbolic attributes of the deity, the ritual songs associated with the ceremony that have attracted considerable scholarly attention. Distinct songs accompany each stage of the ritual process, beginning with the selection and cutting of bamboo, followed by its cleaning, decoration, and ritual washing in a river or pond. Among these are songs known as *jag gān*, which are performed during the clothing and washing rites. These songs are explicitly erotic in nature, containing overt references to sexual organs and sexual acts.

The erotic dimension of the ritual is further reinforced through visual representations. Objects symbolizing the human penis, as well as fishing equipment resembling the female genitalia, are often attached to the Madan-kam bamboo. In certain regions, wooden replicas of the penis and vagina are affixed together while erotic songs are sung. The accompanying dance movements are similarly suggestive, imitating and performing sexual acts. Because of the explicit sexual symbolism and sexual acts embedded in both song and performance, the participation of women in the ritual is generally prohibited.

Although the precise historical process by which this fertility deity came to be identified as Madana or Kamadeva remains unclear, the connection is not so difficult to comprehend. Kamadeva, the Hindu god of love and desire, bears clear thematic parallels to the fertility-oriented and erotic elements of the ritual. Moreover, the ancient name of Assam, *Kāmarūpa*, is itself linked to Kamadeva in

Hindu mythology. These cultural and mythological associations may have facilitated the transformation of an indigenous erotic fertility deity into a form aligned with the Hindu conception of Eros.

Another ritual is popular among the Rajbangsi and Koch-Rajbongshis is Hudum Deo puja. 'Hudum' is a kamrupi word which means naked. In order to bring rain, this rain deity is worshipped when severe drought conditions are prevalent and persist. Hudum Deo is rain god and this puja is celebrated exclusively by the women folks with esoteric rites. In the ritual site, no men are allowed to be present except the drummer and the priest. This unique ritual is done in the middle of the dead night with strictest secrecy at some secluded place away from human habitation. The presence of male member is strictly restricted because all the woman folk who perform this ritual become completely naked and perform the ritual by singing and dancing.

Hudum Deo puja is a special puja where Rajbangsi woman of the village each with a sharp knife in hand as a protection against ghost and spirits go in the dark night, into the distant paddy field. In an open field the folk woman make an image of rain god with banana stalk and banana leaf. After installing the banana tree, all the woman removes their clothes and turn naked, they untie their hairs to hang their hairs freely on the back. Thus, completely nude, they dance and sing erotic songs by abusing and seducing the rain god. The dance movements do imitate sexual positions, and lovemaking. It is mostly believed that the banana stalk is a symbol of phallus or the erect penis of rain god Hudum Deo. The psychological motive behind the performance is the belief in fertility cult.

Here are some of the examples of song sung in the Hudum Deo puja translated in English:

Here comes the rain god Hudum
 Leave your house and door
 Hariya please pour some water
 Hariya has three brothers
 Nobody has water in their penis
 The vagina of Hariya's mother,
 Its resemble like whining instrument (kula)
 To air unclean raw rice
 Hey Hariya please pour some water
 The vagina will float in the sea.

Here is another song cited from Ray, Girjashankar (1999:265);

I feel some sensation in my waist,
 I feel something sensual in my body.
 Where shall I go to meet rain god Hudum?
 The Patani (sari) has fallen off,
 Rain god Hudum please do come.
 I am waiting for you desperately,
 The very big waist of mine.
 I do not have husband,
 What shall I do?
 Where shall I go to meet him?
 If I could meet him my body
 Will be satisfied.

2. R/K Script English Literal translation:

I do not have paddy (rice) in my field.

In the boundary of my paddy,
Filed rats have made their holes.
I have not applied oil in my head (hair)
The vermilion is there in the tip of her (Vagina)
Oh, rain God Hudum!
We do not have water in our place.
Please give me some drop of water,
I would like to wash my vagina.
After washing that thing (vagina),
She left water over there.

The ritual songs associated with Hudum Deo puja are predominantly erotic in nature, a characteristic that is not unique to this tradition but is also observed in various folk, ritualistic, and rain-invocation practices across cultures. In many tribal societies, the human body, fertility, and sexuality are symbolically interconnected, forming an integral part of ritual expression. While such symbolism may appear transgressive or shocking in everyday social contexts, it serves a functional and symbolic role within ritual frameworks. These practices reflect a broader belief system in which natural phenomena are influenced through ritual action. Notably, rain-making and rain-prevention rituals are also documented in ancient religious texts, including the Old Testament. Within so-called primitive or early societies, there exists a strong conviction that successful ritual performance, once it satisfies the rain deity, directly results in rainfall, underscoring a perceived causal relationship between ritual efficacy and environmental response.

Beyond the primary objective of invoking the rain deity during periods of severe drought, these songs also act as a medium to express desire. Many folk songs express desire, where sexual metaphors are used deliberately. In Freudian terms, rain symbolizes libidinal energy and fertility and drought represents repression and sexual anxiety. Calling for rain god is equivalent to calling for sexual release. These folk songs give voice to female desire which is less individual but more collective. Sexual references are collective, agricultural, and functional. There is no individual subject who is desiring another; instead, sexuality and desire is portrayed as a circulating life force that must flow for the community to survive. The songs name sexual organs and taboo subjects which are not individual bodies but they function as a collective symbol of fertility. At its core, the song is constructed around something which is lacking: Lack of rain, lack of water, and lack of satisfaction. The repeated invocation to the rain deity shows the anxiety produced by environmental failure, in form of drought but also onto the body.

In the songs, the female body is repeatedly metaphorized as a field, a boundary, or a terrain through which water must flow. These representations are not intended to eroticize the female body; rather, they function symbolically to articulate concepts of creation, fertility, and continuity. Within this cosmological framework, the female body embodies *prakriti*, the life-generating, material principle in Hindu philosophy that sustains existence through cyclical regeneration. Just as rainfall is indispensable for agriculture, harvest, and survival, the “rain” of love and sexuality is envisioned as necessary for procreation and the perpetuation of life. Among the tribal and agrarian communities, sexual symbolism is deeply embedded in their ritual practices and oral traditions.

Conclusion

The detail analysis of Bas puja (Madan Kamdev Puja) and Hudum Deo puja among the Koch-Rajbanshi community reveals how desire, sexuality and fertility is not repressed or hidden aspects of life but are instead ritualized, sacralised, and submerged within the collective cultural consciousness of the folk community. These rituals not only give the community a moment of celebration and self-expression but also demonstrate how agrarian culture, views sexuality less as a private or moralized

act but more as a cosmic force necessary for procreation, agricultural abundance, and social continuity. By highlighting the erotic symbolism through phallic representations, explicit ritual songs, and sexual suggestive dance movements, the Koch-Rajbongshi rituals articulate a worldview where sexuality mirrors natural and cosmic processes.

Both the rituals function as a performative fertility rite that collapse the binary between the sacred and the erotic. In Bas puja, the worship of the bamboo phallus as Madan Kamdev signifies male generative energy, aligning primitive fertility ritual with broader Shaivite and Shakta philosophical ideas of creative cosmic power which is known as *Lingam*. The restriction of women from direct participation further underscores its gendered structure, where male sexuality is ritualised as a source of communal vitality. Similarly, Hudum Deo puja radically destabilizes patriarchal religious and cultural norms by placing women at the center of ritual authority. Female nudity, erotic speech, and bodily performance are transformed into sacred acts, placing women bodies as powerful sites of fertility, agency and cosmological mediation of creative energy also known as *Shakti*. Together both the rituals express the unity of masculine and feminine principles, without which existence cannot arise.

The erotic songs of Hudum Deo Puja, when read symbolically, articulate collective anxiety over environmental scarcity while simultaneously expressing communal desire for renewal. Sexual organs, metaphors of water, fields, and boundaries operate not as individual erotic fantasies but as shared symbols of agricultural and bodily fertility. Desire here is collective, ecological, and functional, reinforcing the interdependence between land, body, and community. From an anthropological and performance-studies perspective, these rituals also function as embodied knowledge systems. Song, dance, nudity, and symbolic objects transmit cultural memory, ecological understanding, and gendered cosmology across generations. The ritual performances reaffirm social cohesion while negotiating power, gender, and survival in times of crisis. Ultimately, Bas Puja and Hudum Deo Puja illustrate that for the Koch-Rajbongshi community, fertility rituals are not merely religious observances but dynamic cultural practices that sustain life itself – biological, social, and cosmic. By ritualizing desire rather than repressing it, these traditions assert an alternative moral universe in which sexuality is revered as a sacred force of creation, continuity, and resilience.

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