



Choekar: An Indigenous Agricultural Ritual Among The Monpas Of Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh.

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Abstract

Agriculture has historically constituted the foundation of human subsistence systems, shaping settlement pattern, social organization and belief structures. Among indigenous communities agriculture practices are often embedded within ritual and religious frameworks that seek to regulate human nature relationships. Choekor is one such indigenous agricultural ritual observed among the Monpa community of Tawang district Arunachal Pradesh. The festival is celebrated after the sowing of crops and is aimed at ensuring protection of agricultural fields, prosperity of the village and overall wellbeing of the community. Etymologically, the term Choekor is derived from, choe (sacred Buddhist scriptures) and kor (circumambulation), signifying the ceremonial circulation of sacred texts around villages and farm lands. This paper documents the ritual process, symbolic dimensions and agricultural significance of Choekor based on ethnographic fieldwork and secondary sources. The study argues that Choekor represents an indigenous knowledge system that integrates Buddhist religious ideology, agricultural practice, ecological perception and community participation. In the context of rapid socio-economic transformations and declining traditional practices, the paper emphasizes the importance of Choekor as an element of intangible cultural heritage and a repository of traditional ecological knowledge among the Monpas.

Keywords- Choekor, Monpa Tribe, Agricultural knowledge, Indigenous ritual, Cultural heritage.

Introduction-

Indigenous communities across India have developed complex knowledge system that governs their interaction with nature particularly in the domain of agriculture. Festivals and rituals associated with agricultural cycles are not merely religious observances but also function as mechanism for ecological management, social cohesion and transmission of traditional knowledge. In the Eastern Himalayan region of

Arunachal Pradesh, the Monpa community exemplifies such an integrated cultural system in which agriculture, religion and ritual practices are deeply intertwined.

The Monpas of Tawang district primarily depend on agriculture supplemented by animal husbandry. Their farming practices are guided not only by the environmental factors but also by religious and cosmological beliefs rooted in Mahayana Buddhism. Among the various festivals celebrated, Choekor occupies a distinct position as an agriculture ritual specifically performed to protect crops and ensure a good harvest.

Although Choekor is briefly mentioned in ethnographic literature on the Monpas, it has rarely been studied as an independent subject of academic inquiry. Existing work focus on broader aspects of Monpa culture leaving the agricultural and ecological dimension of Choekor underexplored. This study seeks to address this gap by documenting and analyzing Choekor as an indigenous agricultural ritual and traditional knowledge system.

Objectives:

The objectives of the study are-

1. To document the ritual process and performative elements of the Choekor festival.
2. To analyze its agricultural and ecological significance.
3. To examine Choekor as a socio-cultural institution that reinforces community participation and the transmission of traditional knowledge.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Tawang district of Arunachal Pradesh, located in the westernmost part of the state. The district lies at a high altitude in the Eastern Himalayas and shares international borders with Bhutan and autonomous region of Tibet. The terrain is mountainous with deep valleys and agricultural fields. The climatic conditions are characterized by cold winters and mild summers, with agriculture largely dependent on seasonal rainfall and traditional irrigation system.

The Monpas are the indigenous inhabitants of Tawang district and are among the largest Buddhist tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh. Agriculture forms the backbone of their economy, with crop such as Paddy, Maize, Millet, Wheat, Barley and Buckwheat being cultivated. Terrace farming and traditional manuring practices are common. Given the uncertainties associated with climate and altitude rituals like Choekor play an important role in providing psychological assurance and perceive supernatural protection to agricultural activities.

Methodology:

The study employs a qualitative ethnographic research design to document and interpret Choekor as an indigenous agricultural ritual among the Monpa's of Tawang district. Data were generated from both primary and secondary sources to ensure descriptive depth and analytical rigor.

Primary Data Collection: Primary data were collected through participant observation and informal semi-structured interviews conducted with village elders, monks, ritual specialist and community members actively involved in the performance of Choekor. Direct observation of ritual sequences, procession, chants, dances and associated ceremonial practices enabled an understanding of the structure, symbolism and social

organization of the festival. Field instructions also provided insights into local interpretation of agricultural uncertainty, ritual efficacy and spiritual protection.

Secondary Data Collection: Secondary data were drawn from published books, dissertations, journal articles and earlier ethnographic studies on the Monpas and related Himalayan Buddhist communities. These sources were used to contextualize field observations and to situate Choekor within broader discussion on indigenous knowledge system, ritual ecology and agrarian traditions.

The data's were analyzed thematically, with emphasis on ritual process, symbolism, agricultural relevance and socio-cultural functions.

Meaning and Timing of Choekor:

In the Monpa dialect, the term Choekor literally denotes the circumambulation (kor) of sacred Buddhist scriptures (Choe) around villages and agricultural fields. The ritual is performed after the completion of sowing activities, during a less labour intensive phase of the agricultural calendar. This timing is culturally significant, as it corresponds to a period when crops are perceived to be vulnerable to natural calamities, pests and malevolent forces.

The Monpas believe that spiritual entities inhabit the natural landscape and possess the capacity to influence agricultural outcomes. Choekor is therefore performed to sanctify the village space and establish protective ritual boundaries and restore harmony between human, nature and spiritual forces. The observant does not follow a fixed calendar date; instead, each village determines the schedule annually based on collective consensus and agricultural convenience. Generally the festival is celebrated during the seventh month of Lunar Calendar, once sowing of barley, paddy and millet has completed.

Types of Choekor:

Choekor is broadly classified into three types, corresponding to the principal crops cultivated by the Monpas. These rituals are observed during different phases spanning the sowing and harvesting period:

1. Nai Choekor- Associated with Barley cultivation.
2. Kongp Choekor- Related to finger millet.
3. Nu Choekor- Performed in connection with Paddy cultivation.

This classification highlights the close relationship between ritual practice and the agricultural cycle.

Ritual Process of Choekor

- Preparatory Phase -

The observance of Choekor commences several days prior to the main procession. During this preparatory phase, sacred Buddhist scriptures- most notably the Kangyur, Tengyur, Bum and Gye-Tong are ritually recited by monks and village priests. These recitations are believed to purify the ritual space and invoke protective blessings for the village and its agricultural landscape. Throughout the night the scriptures are

ceremonially guarded by the village head priest symbolizing vigilance against malevolent forces that may adversely affect crops and communal wellbeing.

For the effective organization of the ritual, community members collectively contribute essential materials such as barley flour, millets and fire wood required during the ceremonial activities. Monetary contributions are made by all households to remunerate the monk, ritual specialist, village head priest involved in conducting the ceremony. This collective participation underscores the communal nature of Choekor and reflects shared responsibility towards ritual observant and agricultural prosperity.

Procession and Ritual Performances-

On the day of the main ritual, villagers assemble at the village shrine or community hall. The procession is led by the kyengpa (masked dancers), head priest and his assistants known as Kyongyokpa. A ritual specialist known as Kyongyokpa (singer) accompanies the procession chanting hymns and invocatory songs intended to propitiate deities and seek protection for both participants and farmlands.

Selected men dressed as Arpo- ritual protectors or symbolic warriors take part in the procession. Sacred texts, local deity statue, images of Lord Buddha and religious prayer flags are ceremonially carried while circumambulating the village settlement and surrounding agriculture fields. The procession halts at designated places where purification rites are performed. These locations also serve as communal gathering spaces where elders, children and other villagers receive blessings (Wang) from the sacred texts and deities.

At specific points along the route villagers arrange refreshments for the participants carrying the scriptures and ritual objects. Traditional food items and locally brewed wine are offered, reinforcing hospitality and sustaining participants during the extended ritual movements. These acts further symbolized collective support and ceremonial continuity.

Kyeng Cham and Ritual Symbolism-

An distinctive component of Choekor is the Kyeng Cham, a masked dance performed by two young men known as kyengpa because of the elaborate mask resembling skeleton hence the term kyengpa meaning skeleton in Monpa dialect and cham meaning dance. With humorous and exaggerated movements, the dance is believed to distract evil spirits preventing them from harming crops and the village.

The ritual is being lead by the Kyengpa's who with their elaborated dance moves call out the Arpo and the participants. He is accompanied by the rhythmic sounds of Gyelling(Shenai) and Da (Drum) whose beats add to the rhythm of the dance moves. Arpo assembled followed by the head priest and kyongyagpa and the community members carrying the Holy Scriptures, Choe and a statue of the designated village deities. Arpo carries the sword which is positioned outward during the procession symbolizing a ritual war against malevolent forces; the sword is positioned inward upon returning signifying victory and restoration of peace.

Women participants play a significant role by carrying sacred scriptures (choi) and statue of village deities, highlighting gendered ritual responsibilities and inclusive participation. The coordinated movement of priest, dancers, protectors and villagers transform the agricultural landscape into a ritually sanctified space.

Agricultural and Ecological Significance-

Choekor functions as an indigenous mechanism for agricultural protection and ecological regulation within the Monpa community. Although the ritual does not involve direct agronomic intervention, it plays a critical role in reinforcing traditional ecological knowledge and shaping collective attitudes towards farming activities. By ritually sanctifying agricultural fields, Choekor symbolically safeguards crops from natural calamities, pests and other perceived threats, thereby providing psychological assurance to cultivators during a period of agricultural vulnerability.

The ritual also serves to demarcate and ritually reinforce territorial boundaries around agricultural field surrounding farmlands. Through ceremonial circumambulation, these spaces are transformed into protected cultural landscape, emphasizing the interdependence between human activity, spiritual belief systems and the natural environment. This symbolic boundary-making foster a essence of collective vigilance ad responsibility towards agricultural resources.

Socio- Cultural Importance-

Beyond the agricultural functions, Choekor serves as a powerful instrument of social cohesion. The active participation of villagers across age and gender group strengthens community bonds and reinforces shared cultural values. Oral transmission of chants, songs and ritual knowledge during Choekor ensures continuity of cultural heritage.

The festival also provides a platform for intergenerational learning, where younger member observe and participate in traditional practices under the guidance of elders and monks. Thus, Choekor acts as a medium for cultural education and identity reinforcement.

Change and Continuity

Like many indigenous practices, Choekor is undergoing gradual transformation due to modernization, formal education and changing livelihood patterns. Reduced dependence on agriculture and increased exposure to external influences has led to declining participation in some villages. However, village elders continue to play a crucial role in preserving the ritual.

Despite these changes, Choekor remains a living tradition in many parts of Tawang district. Village elders, monks, head priests, ritual specialist play a crucial role in ensuring the continuity of the ritual by transmitting ceremonial knowledge, chants and symbolic meanings through oral tradition and practical demonstration. There authority and commitment help maintain the rituals core structure and cosmological significance, even as it's outward forms evolve.

Furthermore, Choekor has increasingly come to be viewed as a marker of cultural identity and heritage, particularly in the context of grown awareness about the preservation of indigenous traditions. Community led efforts, along with institutional supports from local monasteries and cultural organizations have contributed to sustaining the ritual in modifies forms. Thus, Choekor illustrates a dynamic interplay between continuity and change, demonstrating how indigenous traditions adapt to contemporary realities while retaining their foundational cultural and symbolic essence.

		
kyengpa	kyengpa	Arpo
		
Ritual Specialist & Village Priest	Da' Chekkkan (Drummer)	Gyellingpa
		
Women carrying local Deities(Tehn)and Choe(Holy scripture)		
		
Kongp Choekor	Nu Choekor	Nai Choekor

Conclusion-

Choekor represents a significant indigenous agricultural ritual that integrates religious belief, ecological awareness and community organization among the Monpas of Tawang district. It embodies traditional ecological knowledge aimed at ensuring crop protection, social harmony and spiritual well being. Documenting and analyzing practices such as Choekor is essential for understanding indigenous approaches to environmental management and sustainable agriculture. In the context of rapid modernization and cultural

change, the preservation of such ritual contribute not only to safeguarding intangible cultural heritage but also to recognizing the value of culturally grounded knowledge system in addressing the contemporary challenges related to agricultural and ecology.

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