

## Priestesses of the Tiwas- the unsung lineage

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**Abstract:** Gender bias in the priesthood of sacred places of a society is a common but crucial subject. The female lead in the clergy of a religious ceremony is a skeptical paradox for many societies. This paper aims to understand the status of women of the Tiwa tribe of Assam in their sacerdotal functions. The basic argument is that in India, the priesthood is a lineage headed by men. Women have almost zero or negligible roles when it comes to the clergy. Despite this, in many indigenous communities of India, especially in Assam, women enjoy a relatively better position. Many religious ceremonies are headed by the women of these communities alone. This paper tries to throw light on one such tribe of Assam, called the Tiwas, where women are worshiped as deities and even allow to perform religious rites on many occasions.

**Key words:** Priesthood, the Tiwas, possession, lineage.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

In this research paper, the position of women in religious ceremonies of Assam is examined. Assam is consisted of many indigenous tribes and is well known for its uncountable number of religious festivals. Every festival is associated with many rituals which are normally performed by the men of the community. Men have had the monopoly in priesthood since time unknown. Narayan (2005) too raised the issue of male domination in the priesthood. She writes, 'Qualified men and women can be initiated and taught to conduct the worship for the sake of oneself and the family, svarta, but temple and public worship was, is and will always remain the domain of males' (p.8). Kumari (2014) also narrated the plight of the women monk of Thailand, the *Bhikkhuni* and *Mae Ji*, who are not allowed to enjoy the same strata as the male monk of the country.

Recently women activists in India fight and made the path for women to lead in religious ceremonies. Now in every religion, we can see women are trained for the clergy or priesthood. The recent appointment of women priestesses in Tamil Nadu male dominating temples is a step against the monopoly of men in the sanctum sanctorum of a temple. However, priestess like Nandini Bhowmik, Sheela Atta who performed wedding rituals has challenged the patriarchal mindset of the society of advocating male priest to perform marriage rites. Narayanan (2005) mentioned the women priest of Pillaiyar temple of Injambakkam, Chennai, Tamil Nadu. "The pujari there was always a woman who was well past the menopausal age (menstruation has been cited as one of the main reasons as to why women cannot become priests). Her duties were simple -- simple aratis or sometimes small prayers and blessings in Tamil and Sanskrit. No one had trained her -- she just happened to take this role on" (p.5).

When the mainstream religious leaders are fighting over the gender monopoly, few Indian tribes allowed their women to lead religious ceremonies since time unknown. The Bejunis of Dongria Kondh tribe of Odisha is one such example. Before their initiative of seed preservation comes into media highlight in the year 2015, the Bejunis of Dongria Kondh was well known as the 'witch doctors' (Rout, 2017) only. But after their action as a guardian of some rare indigenous seeds caught everyone's attention. Now, the Bejunis of Odisha are famous as the priestess who marched to sustain their indigenous and rare seeds (Jena, 2015).

Generally in Assam, women are seen assisting men during most religious occasions. In Namghars (a religious institution of Assam), women of the community gather to sing prayer songs called *naam* and offer *mah-prasad* (fruits and grams) to the God. During *naam*, men's presence in religious activities is not necessary. In Assamese communities, women are at charge of the purification ceremony of menarche of a girl known as '*Tuloni bia*'. But in the other religious ceremonies or the sacred places especially in the temples, the work of a woman is confined to attending the male priest. Similar to the few Hindu temples of India such as Sabarimala temple of Kerala, in Barpeta *Satra* (the *satra*-a religious infrastructure that is headed by a Vaishnav leader/ Guru) of Assam women are not allowed inside of the *satra* building. In this context, the Tiwa tribe of Assam is certainly at odd by allowing women of their community to perform religious ordinances.

The Tiwa tribe of Assam is an indigenous tribe with various religious ceremonies. The tribe has three subgroups-

- Hill Tiwas (Hill dwellers of West Karbi Anglong district of Assam),
- Plain Tiwas (Plain dwellers who reside in the Brahmaputra valley mainly in Morigaon and Nagaon districts of Assam)
- Datiyalia Tiwas (lives adjacent to the Hills of Morigaon and West Karbi Anglong districts, Assam).

*Dati* meaning in the Assamese language is the border. So although the Datiyalia Tiwas reside in the plain areas adjacent to the Hills, their religious beliefs and festivals are more similar to the Tiwas of the Hills than the Plain areas. The Tiwas of Plains are mainly patrilineal (follows father's lineage) and also patrilocal (stays with father's family). But the Hill and the Datiyalia Tiwas traditionally follow their mother's lineage. Although they follow their mother's lineage or stays with their mother's family, the position of women in their society is not better than the other tribes of Assam. They are like any patriarchal society where men hold the supreme position. Men are the decision-makers and lead the religious ceremonies. However, there are some exceptions. This exceptional position of women in sacred rituals of the Tiwas is trying to bring forward through this article. The study is based on the data collected during fieldwork and interaction with the locals of the studied area. Similar works on this subject have been consulted for this study. But the study can be considered unique as no article on the female priest of Assam has been found from the archival data. During my fieldwork, I have witnessed many events related to study and applied observation methods to document these.

## II. THE CONTRIBUTION OF TIWA WOMEN IN RELIGIOUS CEREMONIES:

Religion is always a sensitive subject. Any small, new addition or reformation in a religious doctrine uproars conflicts. But while talking about religion, we always neglect the religion of the indigenous tribes that are primarily nature worshipers. It is observed that these tribes worship nature i.e. mother earth, and objects of nature. Their compression towards nature may be the reason for the better position of women in their community. In Assam, the tribal women enjoy a comparatively better status than the other communities. In many instances, tribal women share sacred spaces with men as well.

In the Tiwa tribe of Assam, men are involved in the core rituals of any religious ceremony while women assist them by arranging the offering material for God and guests. The involvement of women in the rituals of the Tiwas is normal. Conventionally, they need to prepare the rice beer -the key offering to their deities. In the household ceremonies of the Tiwas such as marriage ceremonies, birth rituals, household Pujas; Tiwa women take care of the food for their deities and guests as well. This involvement has not been seen in the neighboring Assamese communities and in many places women even cannot touch the offerings. In this paper, the religious positions of women in Tiwa society are discussed. These women priestess not only perform religious rites but also enjoys esteem position in their society. They are-

- The Famari- Famaris are the women who can tell about the past, present, and future of a living or a dead person with the help of their possessed deities. In Datiyalia Tiwa areas, only one Famari is reported to be existed whilst in Hill Tiwa areas, they are many.
- The Hadi and Hadi Konwari- Their existence can be seen in the religious events of Datiyalia as well as the Plain Tiwa areas.
- The women of Asta kara ritual- It is related to the purification rituals of childbirth.
- Women priestess of Barot Puja festival- Here women take the lead in the religious rituals of this festival. Many positions are hereditary here.

### a. The Famari of Umswai valley

According to Borkataky-Varma (2017), the Famaris can be considered as the 'mother tantric' of the tribe. However, they cannot be mistaken as the Ojha present among the Bodos or other communities of Assam. Dey (2019) who wrote about the beliefs and superstition among the Bodo tribe defined Ojha as 'An *ojha* is the one who knows what medicine to use to be able to see witchcraft with his own eyes and how to drive it away'(p.64). In Tiwa society, the Ojha is the shaman who can predict the life events of a person, cure for evil eyes/ spirit, and even perform the rituals to repeal the action of the evil eyes/spirits. In a Hill Tiwa society where many male Ojhas exist, there their beliefs on the Famari who gives only the cure but never perform the rituals by herself is noteworthy. Borkataky-Varma had researched on a Famari of Datiyalia Tiwa area, whereas this research paper is based on the Famaris of Hill Tiwa areas, primarily from the Umswai valley.

Umswai valley is the land where the Tiwas' Chief King Gobha was believed to settle his capital and lived after coming from Meghalaya. This land has many folk stories and archeological remains that indicate that the valley is the homeland of the tribe for centuries. The area has many legends including some living legends. Famaris of Bormarjong is also one of those living legends. There are four Famaris in the valley and they all belong to Bormarjong village. The Famari can be a woman of any age group and is possessed by the deities or a dead spirit. It is worth mentioning that the Tiwa tribe gives their deceased relatives or ancestors a position with God. They worship them separately in Langkhon Puja. Langkhon is a household and community-based annual Puja where the bamboo tree is worshiped. Conventionally, a Famari can tell the past, present, and foresee

future. They even give the solution to any problem of a person. People visit them from distant places to get a solution to their problems. Like other possession stories, the Famaris can tell whatever she is being asked in her possessed state but cannot remember a thing after it's over.

This same story goes to every Famari of the valley. However, the stories of their becoming Famari from an ordinary woman are unique. One middle-aged Famari of Bormarjong who attained her power recollected that three years before while she was asleep, goddesses Lakhumi (Lakshmi) appeared in her dream. After that, she lost her sense for three days. Her family informed her that she behaved like a possessed person and started mumbling things. After she became normal, she gained the power to converse with the deities and spirits of the dead. On asking whether she can remember anything when she is possessed, she had informed that she could not remember anything that happened during the possessed time. She gains the power of Famari on Thursday as it is believed to be a day for Lakshmi Puja in Hindu beliefs. It is a significant finding as the Tiwas of that area are primarily Animist and do not follow Hindu rituals.

The youngest Famari of Umawai is a twelve/thirteen years old girl. Her spiritual invocation happened in January 2021. Her story is a little different than the other possession stories. The hills of West Karbi Anglong are full of broom grass cultivation. During winter, villagers left to the Hills for days to collect broom grass leaving the old and children behind their homes. Since she is a teenager, so she was also accompanied her family to the hills for broom harvesting. One evening she did not return to their temporary shelter of the hill. Her parents thought that she might have returned to their village house. Since there was no mobile network to confirm her whereabouts, the next day her mother returned home and found that she was not at home also. The entire village searched her but could not find her anywhere. Then after two nights, she was found at the same place of the hills where she was spotted last. The girl returned with messy hair, swollen eyes, and eccentric behavior.

The girl was taken back to the home and her parents went to a Famari to enquire about her. The Famari confirmed that she was possessed by Lord Shiva and attained the divine status of a Famari. The Famari instructed the parents to provide the girl with new garments and offer beetle leaves, areca nuts, and flowers. After wearing the new dress and accepting the offerings; the girl becomes normal again. The mother claimed in front of her peers that her daughter often complained that she saw snakes everywhere before that incident. So they were confirmed that it's Lord Shiva who possessed this girl. Now on every Monday, this girl gets possessed if someone comes to seeks any help from her.

All the Famaris have their fixed day in a week according to the respective deities they are possessed. If it is goddesses Lakshmi, then it has to be Thursday. If it is Lord Shiva, then it will be Monday. Interestingly, all the Hill Tiwas of Umswai valley are primarily Animist, but Hindu religious values can be seen here. These mentioned days are considered auspicious for the Hindus also. People who have any problem at home, personal life, health, or even if any relative departs; visit her with beetle nut, flowers, and alcohol. There is a fixed time for the meeting- 8 to 10 o'clock in the morning. People need to visit with the right amount of beetle leaves and areca nuts. If the person has six household deities, then six pairs of beetle leaves and areca nuts with flowers need to be carried in a packet of banana leaves. When people visit her, the Famari enters her worshiped house and comes out as the Famari i.e., possessed by the deity. After this, the Famari sits outside of her worship house/temple facing back to the devotees. Usually Famaris does not have a separate temple house instead their traditional religious house 'Nubar' is used. The devotees offer her their offerings and tell her the reason of visit. Then the Famari invokes the deities of the devotee's house and starts her prophesy.

Binita of Bormarjong village recollected her encounter with the youngest Famari of Bormarjong. Her family went to meet the family due to some family issues. She narrated, "First, we need to bathe and carry white flowers to offer her. We also packed six beetle leaves and areca nuts as we have six Mindai (household deities). While packing the offerings, we take our Mindai's name and pray. Since she is Lord Shiva, so we do not offer her rice beer. Instead, we need to shower as we do while going to a temple. There is a temple in Famari's courtyard. People constructed it after she became the Famari. When she comes out from the temple, she was already the Famari. Then she sat in front of us, we sat behind her and gave her the offerings. We told her our Mindais' names and she then called the name of our Mindais. After this, she started communicating with our Mindais and asked questions. The body of the Famari's was shaking vigorously while she was answering our questions. She cannot tell the name but yes, she can tell the surname of the person who tries to harm us. When we feel that our queries are answered we informed her and then she became normal again. Later we did a Puja at our as suggested by her and it worked".

In the Tiwa language, the meaning of 'Fa' is God. So, 'Famari' is the one who is possessed by God. The one who is possessed by goddess Lakshmi informed that although she won't go to the festival sites, but she got possessed by the goddess Lakshmi during Yangli puja of their village. Needless to say that Yangli is the Lakshmi Puja of the Hill Tiwas that is celebrated every three years. The Famari experienced the same situation in the Wanshuwa festival as it is also associated with the grinding of rice.

My encounter with a Famari, while she was possessed, is slightly different from the claims made by the villagers and the Famaris interviewed during the study. I witnessed the incidence of possession in the Amdoba village of West Karbi Anglong district. Here the Famari of the village visited Wanshuwa festival as a spectator but got possessed. According to the villagers, 'She is caught by the god of Wanshuwa'. I saw her body shaken vigorously with eyes shut and unkempt hair. Her whole aura was of a person in a trance phase. The villagers smeared her face and head with the rice powder paste that was ground in that festival. Like the other festival of the Hill Tiwas, Wanshuwa is also a male-oriented festival. Ritually, people involve in this Wanshuwa Puja need to smear their faces with rice powder mixed with water. Here rice powder is considered as the offering. Since the Famari was possessed by the deity of Wanshuwa, she gained her sanity only after getting the offering. The Tiwas are originally matrilineal ( stays with mother's family). But both matrilineal-matrilineal (follows mother's lineage), patrilineal ( stays with father's family)patrilineal (follows father's lineage). Now they follow both lineages, mostly patrilineal-patrilineal. In the case of the Famari, she can be from any lineage as her position is not hereditary.

In the Assamese community also a concept called *Aai* exists which is near to the Famari concept. These Aais are believed to be possessed by mother goddesses like Kali, Durga. They can also do prophesy and gives a cure for any problem. Some Aais even perform rituals to evade the evil spirit. But their position is not acknowledged by the whole society. But the Famaris of the Hill Tiwa society is not only acknowledged by the entire community, but also given a position equal to the mother goddess of their area.

**b. The Hadis of Morigaon district:**

Unlike the Famaris, the Hadi is a hereditary status. She cannot leave her parent's home, instead, her husband needs to relocate to his in-law's house. This system of marriage is called Gobhia marriage. There are two types of Hadi in Plain and Datiyaliya Tiwa society. One is related to religion and the other is kingship. Both are clan-oriented and should be from the same clan. Technically the title of Hadi is given to a daughter of the Hadi family. This daughter needs to do the religious work of any festival or Puja. The Gobha king is the chief king of the Tiwas. In his Kingdom, there is a Hadi who can be his sister, cousin, aunt from his paternal side. The Hadi needs to brew alcohol and serve it during the all religious festival held at the Gobha King's house. The Hadi of the Gobha kingdom can be considered as 'the Rajmata' meaning the King's mother (RaduKakati, 2016). For this, she is known as the Hadi Kunwari (*Kunwari*- the queen in Assamese). The present Hadi Kunwari is Rajita Malay and she is the cousin of the Gobha king. Since the Hadi's position is equivalent to the King's, so they cannot live in the same village. Therefore, the present Gobha king Deepsingh Deoraja shifted his capital to Na-khala of Jagiroad. Now the Gobha kingdom has two capitals, one is Gobha and other is Na-Khala.

The Hadi Kunwari of the Gobha kingdom can also take political decisions apart from participating in religious ceremonies. However, the work of the Hadi of the other places is confined to religious activities. She is associated with the Borghar of clans. The Borghar is a religious institution of every clan. The Nellie king, Ram Singh Deoraja's Borghar is in Makaria village. The village is around 2 km from Nellie main junction. The head priest of Borghar is called Bor Jela or simply Jela. He is the husband of Hadi of Makaria. This Hadi belongs to the Muni clan that is the same as the Nellie king. Traditionally, the daughter of a Hadi gets the Hadi status. So the husband of the Hadi needs to relocate to his wife's house. Now the daughters-in-law are also allowed to have this status. The present Hadi is Majoni Konwar and her husband is Dineshwar Konwar. By birth, Majoni is from the Damlowali clan. After her marriage, she started living with her husband's family and was considered as one from the Muni clan. Her mother-in-law was the previous Hadi. Majoni was given this title after her mother-in-law passed away. After Majoni, one of her daughters or daughter-in-law will get this status. However, the daughter will be only eligible if her husband becomes a Gobhia.

The Muni clan's Borghar is located in the courtyard of Majoni's house. Two big festivals are associated with this Borghar. One is celebrated in mid-January. It can be considered as the Magh Bihu of the Datiyaliya Tiwas (post-harvesting festival) and is held on the next Sunday of the Magh Bihu. The other Puja is celebrated during Bohag Bihu (mid-April) and is bigger than the other one. The Bor Jela is the head priest and performed the Puja, while the Hadi needs to provide him all offerings for Puja such as rice beer, flowers, incense sticks, etc. Besides, she needs to cook the food that is offered to the god. Except for her, no one is allowed to touch these offerings.

The Hadi of other clans is also associated with their Borghars. Their primary work is to perform the Borghar Puja and they also take an active part in the purification ceremony of a newborn called '*Manashaw kheda*' (Bordoloi, 2017; Pator, 2016). At present, most of the Tiwa villages do not have a single Borghar and therefore, this purification process is executed by the elderly women of the community. According to Rani Hazarika Kakati, Rtd. Professor of Gauhati University, earlier Hadis were considered as divine people. She had informed me that she could meet only one Hadi in her entire life as an Anthropology professor. Kakati met her in an interior village of the Morigaon district of Assam. The Hadi used only earthen pots for eating and cooking

food. She even restrained everyone from touching. Now, Hadis do not follow such hard and refrained life restrictions but still, their position is considered sacred in their society.

**c. The *Asta kara* and purification ritual:**

Impurity and childbirth are two correlated words in every religious society. Every religious society held a purification ceremony after childbirth. The Hill Tiwa also believed in the impurity of childbirth. Earlier, in the Hill Tiwa societies, elderly women used to be the head priest and performed the purification ritual of childbirth. It is called *the Asta kara* ritual. It was observed when a child is brought outside of the house for the first time. These women performed the sacrifice ritual where they slaughtered fowl as offering to deities. They performed this ritual to ward off the evil eye from the child and to bless them with good health. However, this ritual has not been practiced for decades and can be considered a dying tradition (Baruah,2021). The *Asta kara* is a unique tradition as a woman generally gets the liberty to assist or on a few occasions to perform rituals. But it is rare to see them performing a sacrificial ritual that is otherwise considered as a masculine act.

**d. Priestesses of Barot Puja festival:**

The Barot Puja is a festival where an amalgamation of politics, culture, and religion of Tiwas has been seen. It is a Plain Tiwas' festival and is organized in every five years at Tetelia village of Morigaon district. Tetelia village is the erstwhile Tetelia kingdom. The villagers still follow their king and rituals related to their kingdom. It is held under the patronage of the King of Tetelia. While the cultural aspects are taken care of by men and women both but religious activities are performed by women only. Men assist women mainly in making the necessary tools for the Puja like banana boats, bamboo stands, etc.

The head priestess of Barot Puja is Barotani, which is a hereditary position and is passed to the daughter-in-law. She is assisted by many Namatis (one head singer and many singers who sing prayer songs of Barot), a Princess (a young girl from King's family), a Madoi (the princess' mother), four Ayatis (adolescent girls from the four villages of the kingdom). These women and girls start performing the rituals of the Barot festival three months before the festival. Men play a negligible role here. Musicians play the drum and flute during the prayers. At the festival ground, male dancers wear masks and dance with the rhythm of the drum, flute making the festival livelier. Barot Puja is one of the biggest festivals of the Plain Tiwas of Morigaon. The women's participation as the head priestess and doing all the religious activities shows the gender equality mindset of this indigenous tribe of Assam.

### III. CONCLUSION

In this research, I have studied the status of women in the sacerdotal ceremonies of the Tiwa society. This study shows that the position of a Tiwa woman in their society is better than their other counterparts of the states. The rigidity in their traditional values helped the Tiwas, especially the Hill dwellers maintaining their rituals from any changes.

In the different sects of Hindusim (including the Animist); women are seen taking an active part in performing the household Pujas, Pujas related to womanhood like menarche of a girl, purification ceremonies of childbirth, etc. However, they rarely hold the position of a priest in the sacred rituals and places of the community. In this aspect, the Tiwa priestesses are exceptional. They are not only ritual performers, but women like the Famaris are posited with deities.

The Tiwas have strong beliefs on their Famaris. However, as an outsider, the story of the teenaged Famari leaves doubt of child abuse. The girl was disappeared for two days and returned home in a disoriented state. So, there might be a chance of physical exploitation, since at that time the people from many villages went to the hills to collect broom leaves. Besides, the possession stories are considered as neurophysiological, many times supernatural (Kenner, 2010), and also psychopathological (Hanwella et al, 2012). Hanwella et al (2012) stated, "In a global survey of 488 societies, 437 (90 percent) had one or more institutionalized, culturally patterned form of altered states of consciousness. In 252 societies, such experiences were attributed to possession"(p.1). Therefore the possession state of the Famaris could be a topic of future research. Moreover, there is not much data available on *Asta Kara*, where women were involved in sacrificial rituals. This could be a very interesting study as women are only seen working as an assistant to the priest like the Hadis or singing prayers like the Namatis of the Tiwas. But performing the fowl sacrifice ritual is uncommon which is considered a men's task.

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