
ECO-SPIRITUALITY IN THE IDU MISHMI FUNERAL CUSTOM

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ABSTRACT

Geography and environment play a vital role in shaping the motifs and themes of the Idu Mishmi funeral narratives. The description of places, mountains, cliffs, valleys, rivers and gorges etc. with different species of animals, plants and spirits form the allegorical representation of the elements of nature. In the subjective component of the Idu Mishmi death ritual, nature's shape, formations and objects not only become the driving force but also become essential parts of the culture. As a whole, nature and nature's formations become the necessary components that determine the thought process and spiritual sustenance of the community. This dimension explores the community's attitudes to the environment are conditioned by their traditional beliefs that have played a crucial role in the conservation of the environment and organisms in their region so far. This paper looks at the Idu Mishmi Community's approach to the Environment as manifested in the funeral rite Ya and attempts to understand how this aspect has been a driving force in the conservation of ecology.

Keywords: Environment, Spirituality, Sustainable development.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Idu Mishmi death rites called Ya promote socio-cultural development and reveal the belief system of the community. The Ya ritual is employed by the community not just for the purgation of their emotions but also to create, manifest and affirm basic cultural values of the community. The beliefs and psychological attitudes of the people towards the ritual reveal their faith in the custom as well as fear of the same.

The Idu Mishmi cultural identity revealed in the death ritual is conditioned by geographical space, historical past, philosophical outlook and religious beliefs. Therefore, the rituals and taboos observed by the Idus are sociological as well as psychological discourse which is instrumental in understanding their culture.

Geography and environment play a vital role in shaping the motifs and themes of the Idu Mishmi funeral narratives. The description of places, mountains, cliffs, valleys, rivers and gorges etc. with different species of animals, plants and spirits form the allegorical representation of the elements of nature. In the subjective component of Idu Mishmi death ritual, nature's shape, formations and objects not only become the driving force but also become essential parts of the culture. As a whole, nature and nature's formations become the necessary components that determine the thought process and spiritual sustenance of the community. This dimension explores the community's attitudes to the environment are conditioned by their traditional beliefs that have played a crucial role in the conservation of the environment and organisms in their region so far.

This paper looks at the Idu Mishmi Community's approach to the Environment as manifested in the funeral rite Ya and attempts to understand how this aspect has been a driving force in the conservation of ecology. Moreover, the paper also proposes that government policies need to balance science and socio-cultural foundations in consultation with the local communities as

for conservation and sustainable use of natural resources it is not only important to understand the resources that are used but it is equally important to understand what values and feelings people apply to these resources and why?

2. ENVIRONMENT AND SPIRITUALITY

The core driving force of every culture and belief system is determined by the physical environment of the region. As it is a product of the physical environment, the culture and belief system intrinsically wields its influence on man's activities. The funeral oral texts of Idu Mishmis also reflect the culture which is conditioned by geographic topography.

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Probably, when Idus discovered themselves surrounded by lofty mountains, perennial majestic rivers and rich natural biotic and abiotic elements which again were conditioned by unpredictable weather, they might have endeavoured to explain and understand the diverse phenomenon affecting them. In some aspects, they were able to employ the environmental elements for their purposes and accepted diverse phenomena as part of their life by modelling their culture and way of life around them. The topography, soil, climate, the varied species of plants and animals, rivers etc., seem to have exerted the feeling of awe, inspiration and aspirations among them. The powerful natural phenomenon seems to have influenced them to revere the natural forces supposing them to be divine and supernatural. The unpredictable as well as random wrath and favours of nature also seem to have shaped the concept of worship and appeasement among the Idu Mishmis.

It seems, the Idus, like many indigenous people of the world saw the power of the sun affecting the world and deemed it as the most powerful supernatural entity. They might have witnessed and understood the power of light as the source of life and nourishment therefore; the sun is the most revered one. In different rituals, the sun is offered sacrifices and called upon to bear witness to grave ordeals and solemn oaths. For Idus, the sun is a female entity and mother who does not involve herself much in the affairs of humans. She is revered but remains afar. There are no direct references to her in the death ritual but all the almighty entities are addressed by using Innyi (sun) as a prefix, like Innyi- Matomearu, Innyi-lopuli, Inni-Ahiliru etc.

Natural phenomena like different seasons, the roaring winds and clouds, thunder and lightning, rain and blazing fire, graceful and majestic mountains, furious as well as generous mighty rivers, high majestic cliffs and unfathomable deep gorges, the forest brimming with its abundance have attracted and impacted upon their religion. Fundamentally Idu Mishmi religion is woven around the concept of supreme power which is a personification of natural forces and quasi-divine human beings consisting of powerful Shamans, brave valiant and great almighty ancestors. The supernatural entities can be divided into two sections viz Extra-terrestrial and Terrestrial according to their spiritual characteristics and abode.

Extra-terrestrial supernatural entities:

Innyi, the sun is the most prominent extra-terrestrial goddess. One may also consider Mato (the cloud keeper) as an extra-terrestrial entity.

Terrestrial supernatural entities:

Among the Idus, spirits dwell everywhere. In the mountains, rivers, trees, animals, birds, agricultural plots and at home, spirits even dwell in different sections of the house. For every ailment, there is a different spirit. The terrestrial supernatural entities, therefore, are mostly topographical features, animals, birds and different ailments.

There are numerous rivers in the Mishmi Hills. Probably highest among the hills in North East India therefore it is no surprise to find them having significant imprint on their culture. Rivers even play a very significant role in the social identity of the Idu Mishmis. The Idu region is primarily divided into different sections according to their habitat in the river valleys and identified according to it. Mathun (for people who dwell in the valley of Mathun), Dri (people who dwell in the valley of Dri) Taloh, Emra, Ahi, Ithu and Ihi respectively.

Unfathomable mighty rivers are also the abode of many spirits. Apart from Bruwu the water deity, the powerful spiritual serpents Manu and Beka also dwell here. The eternal and constant mighty rivers are a source of life as well as death. The other sides of the river represent mystery and awe which generates myths and speculations. Crossing the river is a symbol of crossing the line between life and death itself.

Andomo or Kandi is the spiritual river which separates the human world and the afterworld. Only the dead can cross the river. Therefore the shaman while escorting the soul needs to die to sail through it. The river separating the human world and the afterworld seems to be a cross-cultural belief.

Mishmis themselves dwell in mountain ranges. In most religions, mountains have an important symbolic role. They are the geographic points at which followers believe they are the closest to their gods or to the highest points of the universe. Among the Idu Mishmis, the lofty and majestic mountains are the abode of high and mighty supernatural entities like Goloh. They are the most powerful terrestrial supernatural entities who are not to be offended. Golohs are the keepers of wealth and showers' harvest. They bestow hunts and catches in rivers. There are also Golohs who are responsible for causing people to die by drowning in water as well as by burning in fire. The mountains are also home of spirits which cause dreadful diseases like epilepsy, dreaded most by the Idus.

3. PLANTS, ANIMALS, BIRDS, ARTHROPODS

Like almighty ancient shamans and valiant and powerful ancestors, different plants and animals have evolved from supernatural beings or have resulted from their divine action. They all possess souls and descend to the underworld with man.

Apart from the references of different plants which are essential components of the death ritual, other plants and their parts which are used in their daily life are also part of the oration.

The bamboo species Abrato is employed by shamans and is indispensable in various rituals. As a symbol of spiritual power, it can ward off the negative forces because powers are invoked in it. Interestingly abrato originated from the blood of a wronged woman, who was pure and graceful. Abrato the bamboo plays the most significant symbol in the Idu Mishmi religion. Tothro the source of power in ritual is made of abrato shrub. It is also a symbol of feminine spirituality as well as fertility. It is also a spiritual textile tutelary symbol as the Textile goddesses Angraya and Apili had tied knots in it with spiritual yarns and made knots on it. Therefore, to be a good weaver the Idu Women make different weaving equipment with abrato. The utility of the Abrato bamboo among the Idu Mishmis also may be the factor which made the tribe revere it. Their material culture would have been wanting and insufficient without the bamboo. From house to small equipment like spoons, tongs, baskets etc. are made of abrato. The shoot is also a delicacy among the tribe.

The ability of the abrato to spread its roots and multiple shoots might have made the tribe revere it as a symbol of fertility. It is indispensable part of Idu Mishmi textile tradition. All the weaving equipment is made of it. Therefore it also has spiritual significance. Moreover, evergreen, bamboo is a symbol of old age and modesty. Fascination with bamboo can be traced in many East Asian cultures.

Other plants revered are irubo, aetombo, aevena, dosolibo, kapi, Plantain, sugarcane etc. Kapi and Ishu plants are in the domain of gallants as they use these plants to make arrows and shields. They are symbols of protection and therefore employed by the shaman to build a spiritual shield around the people.

The Irubo tree is also revered by the tribe. It is invoked as and symbol of security as it is used for constructing the house. The frame of the house, columns and rafters are made of irubo tree. The leaves of the wild Palm aeve and plantain are also employed during the ritual. Aevena has spiritual significance as Amungo, the structural medium to transport the soul is made of it. Aeyioto is also made of aevena. It is a broom-like structure which the shaman darts from time to time to clear the path of the soul during the shamanic journey.

The plantain pseudo stem is used by the shaman to ash the person who had prepared the corpse. Many animals according to the Idus are products of the divine birth. As per the origin myth, the pigs are the offspring of the almighty spirit Inni-ashili. Though mithun also has a divine origin its myth does not become part of the narrative in funeral oration as oral text related to it gets impetus in the Reh ritual. Similarly, chicken is also attributed to divine origin but its origin is a component of Ayii and Arebi rituals. For Amrase and Ya, the pig is the most significant sacrifice. It is only through the sacrifices of the pig that supernatural entities are appeased. The chicken is indispensable in most of the Idu rituals. As pigs, mithun and chickens are of divine origin they are the only animal deemed fit for sacrifices.

Dog among the Idu Mismis is a symbol of protection. The spiritual bark of the dog keeps the evil spirits at bay. It is a true friend of a hunter who even protects the humans during the spiritual quest to the next world. The dog sacrifice is rare and only to ward off dreadful and evil spirits which cause deadly diseases like epilepsy.

Other animals which become part of the funeral orations are bears, tigers and monkeys. Among the animals, the bear's soul is the most dangerous and waits for the hunters to avenge his killing. The reason for the belief may be linked to the fact that the Idus were most of the time victims of bear attacks in hunts and agricultural farms. Tiger is believed to be the brother of Idus. Similar belief prevails among most of the non-Bodhic Tibeto-Burman Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. The strength and prowess of tigers might have had a deep psychological impact on these tribes. Among the Idus, after killing a Tiger, the hunter follows the same ritual as followed after killing a man. Monkey figures in the trickster tale. Elwin points to parallel motifs among the many tribes of India.

Among the birds mentioned in the funeral oration, we get contrasting images of a hawk and an owl. The hawk is a symbol of spiritual insight and a powerful agent collaborating with shamans for the welfare of humanity. On the other hand, the owl is the product of an evil origin which has associations with the underworld and agent of death. The reason for the dread of the owl seems to have arisen as there is an ancient aura of mystery about it. Part of this is because it is a nocturnal bird, and nighttime has always seemed mysterious to humans. Other birds like puku, peka (treepie) and ipi (sparrow) are the friends of people who were able to steal grains from the granary of Golloh for humans. Similarly, birds like prawu and pishu show the path to the almighty shaman Sineru in his quest.

The soul also has to face the evil eternal bird Kandi-Pothro and save his belongings. This bird most probably is modeled around the Crane which is in abundance on the bank of the river Brahmaputra.

Fish is the symbol of Prosperity and wealth. Fishing is also an important source of economy and sustenance, however symbolically it is a symbol of affluence due to its ability to reproduce its offspring.

Serpents like Viper are dreaded most as they punish liars during the ordeals.

4. CONCLUSION

The Idu Mishmis therefore, have had a cultural, social historical relationship with the environment and land since the ancient past. Their approach to nature is founded upon traditional scientific knowledge of their land, natural resources and environment. The interrelationship between the natural environment and tribe has considerably contributed to the preservation of ecology in their place. These rituals manifest that the tribe have been maintaining a balanced ecology and is an agent of the preservation of rich biodiversity. In the present times studies on the tribe have indicated that these rituals were the basis of animal and forest conservation (Ayadurai, 2014). The tribal belief system like that of the Idus which contributes to biodiversity conservation can be infused in the conservation projects so that they become part of the conservation process.

However, the situation in the coming days is going to change with the government's proposal to build dams in the Mishmi Hills. The government wants to make the region India's Powerhouse. They have identified Dibang River's potential of 10152 Megawatt. They have started 3000 Megawatt NHPC and 4500 Megawatt dam at Etalin. Many more hydro projects Dams are being surveyed. If built, the dam reservoirs will inundate some valleys by up to 500 meters. It will have a two-fold impact on the region's wildlife direct impacts on the animal habitat and long-term impacts and changes in local culture.

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