

## CHAPTER V

### Community rituals, Identity and Gender: Contemporary Shifts and Continuities

#### 5.1. Introduction

As already mentioned in the previous chapters, women's participation in religion and religious practices has often gone undocumented in more than one way. Even though they have been active supporters and even carriers of religious ideologies and institutions throughout the history of the rise of various world religions, once established, women's role has been made to appear non-existent from the formal realm of these religious traditions. This bias in representation has been followed by most male historians and scholars documenting religions, mainstream and vernacular alike, writing off women and their contribution and participation from the historical records of almost all world religions. To put women back in the record then becomes an important task of feminist thinking on religion (Juschka, 2001, Pechilis, 2013). This chapter documents and highlights the nuances of ritual practice and the authority of *haari* that otherwise had not found a place in the larger documentation of the role of women ritual specialists in community life of Tiwas.

The feminist critical paradigm on religion has argued how religious ideas are rooted in time and space and affected by power relations (Fiorenza, 1983). It places the question of women's religious and social role at the center of its analysis (Christ, 1991). While Christ's argument sets the early tone for the necessity of a feminist analysis of religion, contemporary feminist scholar Darwin (2018) has argued how sociology of gender often oversees religion as an element of analysis and how sociology of religion in turn fails to do a meaningful analysis of gender, despite both working as two mutually constitutive categories. By 'doing religion' (Avishai, 2008) women often carry out religion as a mode of being. However, apart from being a performance of identity, it also provides women with strategic ends that are non-religious. A redoing of religion is thus intrinsically linked to a redoing of gender (Darwin, 2018), providing ground for an inclusive social change.

Drawing from these feminist theoretical understandings of religion, this chapter examines the role of the *haaris* through the community rituals of the tribe. It explores how the gender

division sanctioned by the community informs the ritual status of the *haaris* and shapes/colors/influences their agency as individual as well as female ritual specialists that further gets exercised outside of the ritual sphere. The chapter critically looks at the ways in which ritual as well as gender boundaries viz-a-viz within *borghor* premises are manifested and also how they are blurred through practice during the community rituals. The chapter then uses ethnographic observations to understand how these rituals become a space for the *haari* to navigate through and at times transgress the boundaries of public and private to actualise her role which is prescribed as a female ritual specialist within the private domain of her *kul*.

According to the respondents gained through snowballing during the pilot research, it is through community rituals within the *borghor* premises that the roles of the ritual specialists within the tribe can be best observed. As found out from respondents during fieldwork, the Plains Tiwas have a number of rituals that take place in the *borghor* premises round the year. Of these, the *monshwo* and the *korom* are the largest and the most significant annual community rituals signifying birth and death. According to respondents, it is during these two rituals when the entire *kul* along with its *khel* of affiliation come together and celebrate its gods, goddesses, ancestors and newborn members. When I expressed my particular interest in observing and understanding the institution of *haari*, it was suggested by respondents that I attend these two rituals.

## **5.2. The community rituals in the *borghor*: Representations and omissions of gender in literature**

The community ritual practices, in many ways, are symbolic of tribe unity. These community rituals are essentially held within the *borghor* premises of the concerned *kul*. Apart from being the most important sacred structure, the *borghor* is also held as the most important sacred space of the community, since apart from the religious rituals, all the ritual decisions involving the *kul* are also carried out in the *borghor* premises.

Bolairam Senapati (2018), one of the earliest scholars from the community wrote,

‘To start eating tender betel nut, the Tiwas have to conduct a ritual called ‘*deuxewa*’ at the *borghor* whereby they have to make the first offering to the *kul* God/Goddess. It is only after that the betel nuts can be consumed by the community. The *korom* ritual or the last

rites of the dead members and annual rituals of worshipping the *kul* ancestors also have to be carried out at the *borghor* premises where the host *kul* has to invite members from their own *kul* and also the entire *khel* for a ritual feast. The *monshwo* or the common purification/initiation ritual of the newborns from a *kul* also has to be carried out in the *borghor*. In the *borghor* itself, after the harvest in the month of *Aaghun*, a *kul* offers traditional brew made out of the new rice grains to the elder members of the *khel* and seek their blessing for the entire year. Other than that also, annual offerings of traditional rice cakes are made to the *kul* Gods as well as to the ancestors throughout the three Bihus. If anyone from a *kul* commits a sin, the atonement can only be attained by confessing and carrying out the subsequent atonement rituals at the *borghor* in presence of the community. In cases of marriage alliance through *gobhia* and elopement also, the elderly members of the *khel* conduct the social marriage of the couples by seeking the blessings of the *kul* god at the *borghor*. In marriage alliances, the rites of transferring *kul* of the bride to that of the groom or of the groom to that of the bride (in case of *gobhia*) is also performed at the *borghor* by offering roosters.’ (Senapati, 2018, 4)

The above text and a number of other writings on the ritual practices of the tribe have given structural functionalist accounts of the tribe and its ritual practices, describing the ideal way of Tiwa life and community ritual practices. Some of these have briefly mentioned the assigned ritual positions of the *haari* and the *ghorjela* or the *ghorburha*. However, no text could be found that critically discussed the nuances of these roles in the ritual practices of the tribe. A coherent narrative on the *haari* as the female ritual specialist of the tribe was particularly found to be absent from the colonial as well as post-colonial documentations on the tribe.

It could be gathered from field observations that as claimed by the existing literature, the *borghor* is the space where the spirituality of the community comes to life. However, as already argued in the previous chapter, it is also the space where a) the ritual roles of the designated members become prominent and are exercised in full force, b) the blurring of ritual boundaries is seen as ritual hierarchies interact in practice.

The presence of the *haari* and the *ghorjela* is fundamental to all the community rituals carried out in the *borghor*. According to Podumi Patar, *haari* of Madur *kul*, apart from carrying out her ritual role in the various religious rituals of the *kul*, the *haari* has to perform a few fixed annual rituals in the *borghor*. A very important ritual among these is *pitha peluwa* or *deu-xewa*. It is performed three times in a year along the lines of the

festivities of the three forms of Axomiya Bihu (the most important and popular folk festival of Assam, observed by almost all communities indigenous to Assam in its various forms) celebrated in Assam- during the time of winter harvest or Bhogali Bihu, during the time of the Axomiya new year or Bohaag Bihu in spring/summer and during the time of Kaati Bihu observed in autumn while sowing new paddy. The *haari* is accompanied by the *ghorbura* and the people of the concerned *kul* during the *deu-xewa* in the *borghor*. Podumi *haari* further shared it is only after the *haari* performs the *deu-xewa* that the commoners consume the food served.

This chapter aims to explore the community rituals beyond their textual descriptions in available accounts and critically understand them in their contemporary setting by examining the gendered nuances of the rituals and ritual positions that get manifested in the ambiguities of practice.

### **5.3. The ritual of *Korom* and *Monshwo*: Philosophy of birth and death**

From what could be understood through field ethnography of the rituals, birth and death bear a place of deep philosophical significance in the lives of the Tiwas. This philosophical significance put on birth and death is manifested through their ritual universe. The Tiwas believe that no kin truly leave at death. One who dies always comes back in some other form or body, thus continuing a balanced cycle of life and death. They also believe that the deceased soul takes rebirth from a different womb though usually within the same *kul*. According to Podumi Patar, a very common practice among the Tiwas is ‘*mongol suwa*’, where the family of a newborn infant visits a ‘*mongoloti*’ (a Tiwa person believed to be able to tell fortune, somewhat similar to a shaman, can be a male or a female) who tells if the child’s soul is of a previous family member. Once a rebirth is confirmed by the *mongoloti*, the child is usually presented with gifts by his/her immediate kin from previous birth, and a lifelong kinship bond is thus formed. The continuity assigned to life in this entire practice and how while doing so the tribe ensures its own continued life and what it deems important, both spiritually and socially, is an interesting prelude to understanding their social world and its heavily gendered connotations.

The plains Tiwas have a tradition of conducting common annual birth and death rites for all the members who were born or had died in the previous year. The common birth ritual is called ‘*monshwo*’ and the common death ritual is called ‘*korom*’. Even though these

rituals provide an insight to the socio-religious universe of the tribe, nuanced writings on these rituals are scarce, except for some articles by a few early indigenous Tiwa scholars.

During my initial conversation with Dr. Bidyut Senapati and later with my primary respondent Podumi *haari* when I had asked her which are the rituals that are seriously observed by the community, I was told that these two ritual events are considered by the members as the most important of all community rituals. According to them, the reason why *monshwo* and *korom* are so important as rituals is because through these rituals the community members celebrate birth as they welcome the newborns as the new members of the *kul* and also appreciate death and departure as they together bid a final goodbye to some members of the *kul*. Dr. Senapati also added that since my particular interest was to learn about the tradition of *haari*, observing *monshwo* and *korom* would provide me with the best opportunities to do so. Upon asking, I was invited by Podumi Patar, the *haari* of Madur *kul* and also one of my primary respondents, to attend the *monshwo* and *korom* rituals of their *kul*, to be held at the *borghor* of Madur *kul*.

#### **5.4. Monshwo: The community birth ritual**

According to Tiwa scholars like Bolairam Senapati (2018), Ganesh Senapati (\_\_\_), Maneshwar Dewri (2013), '*monshwo*' is the formal initiation ceremony of a Tiwa infant into the respective *kul*, and in turn into the tribe. It is annually carried out by a *kul* in the *borghor* premises. A date, usually within the Assamese months of *Magh-Phagun* (mid-January-mid March) is fixed by the *haari* and *ghorjela* of the host *kul* as per convenience of the *kul* members with new born children. Accordingly, the *haari* prepares rice brew and summons the ritual specialists from other *kuls*. The duty of the *ghorjela* is to physically invite them. The ceremony begins in the courtyard in the presence of *jelas*, *haaris*, and other members from the *khel*. Children born within a year are brought to the courtyard to undergo the initiation rituals. In the initiation ceremony, the children and their mothers are blessed by the *jelas* and the other elderly members seated in the courtyard. Thereafter, the *jelas* take the male infants in the courtyard and sing and dance to the tunes of *laali hilaali* (Tiwa traditional folk song), also called *monshwo geet* when they are sung on the particular occasion of *monshwo*. The female infants are taken by the *haaris* to the inside of the *borghor* where they are to be blessed by the *kul* gods, goddesses and ancestors (Senapati 2018).

During the fieldwork for this research as I observed the rituals closely, the rules of these rituals were seen to blur themselves in practice. The hierarchies interacted with each other towards an ambiguous execution of power. It is where I could see the *haari* using the power of her ritual role to access spaces otherwise exclusively reserved for and occupied by men. It is in this transgression of ritual boundaries where her ritual authority was seen getting actualised. This shall be elaborated in the sections to follow.

For the English year 2019, for Madur *kul*, ‘*monshwo*’ was observed to initiate four infants born last year into the tribe. Amshi *kul* on the other hand had five infants to be initiated into the *kul* for the English year 2022. I witnessed two *monshwos* during my fieldwork which had to be carried out in two different years due to the outbreak of Covid-19.

#### **5.4.1. *Monshwo* and the symbolism of ‘*ron*’ or battle: Prescribed interpretation of birth and the ambiguity of practice**

When I reached the Bohgaon *borghor* on the day of ‘*monshwo*’, the preparations for the celebration had already begun. I was asked by Podumi to wear traditional Tiwa attire for the occasion. According to her, this was required if I was to get access to the inside of the *borghor*. As I entered the *borghor* premises, I saw that everyone present was dressed in traditional Axomiya attire. The men sitting in the courtyard wore white *dhoti* and shirt/kurta while the women wore *mekhela saador*, almost all of them wearing white. Most of them had the Axomiya white *gamusa* (the quintessential traditional Axomiya towel bearing cultural significance) wrapped around their neck while a few had used the orange colored traditional Tiwa *phali* (Tiwa traditional towel similar to Axomiya *gamusa*, used for various occasions in Tiwa social life).

The courtyard was occupied by a group of around thirty elderly men who sat on blocks of timber spread on the ground forming a square. The womenfolk were spread across the campus but outside the courtyard, especially the square space occupied by men. A few of them were sitting in the verandah of the host household but most of them were seen sitting in the cooking area beside the courtyard. These women, around twenty of them and belonging to different age groups, were preparing for the *monshwo* feast to be hosted after the ritual. All of these men and women, I was told, were all from the same *khel*, with most belonging to the host *kul*- Madur.

Podumi was speaking to an elderly person seated in the courtyard when she saw me. She introduced me to the latter as ‘*aamar jaatire suwali, amar kotha lekhibaa ahise*’ (she’s from our community only, has come to write about us). She then introduced the person as the *borjela* of their *khel* and went inside the *borghor*. The latter welcomed me and asked a few questions about where I came from, where I was studying, and so on. Upon learning about my Tiwa roots and the purpose of my visit, he agreed to engage in a brief conversation with me.

Upon being asked how long he has been in his ritual designation, Boloram Patar, the *borjela* of the *khel* shared-

‘*Besi bosor hua nai.. moi praai notunei.. saakorir karone besibhag xomoy bahirotei thakilu.. Etiya retire huar pisot he gaaot nigajike thakisuhi.. mur niti niyomkhini iman obogoto nohoi.. etiyau xikihe aasu.. tothapi mili meli solaai disu.. Amar haari burijoni niti niyombilaak dekhwai diye..*’

(It’s not been long.. I’m almost new.. (I) stayed outside for many years due to my job.. Now after retirement I have come back to stay permanently in the village.. I am not very fluent in the rituals.. still learning.. still manage by doing it together.. Our haari burhi (referred to Podumi as an elderly *haari*) also tells me a deal about the rituals..)

-Boloram Patar, 55, *borjela*, Bohgaon village; interview taken on the day of *monshwo* of Madur *kul*, 17th February, 2019

As Boloram answered my questions, I observed Podumi *haari* moving around the courtyard, talking to the members and at times commanding them to fetch and move things as she headed to the inside of the *borghor*. The initiation ceremony began shortly after.

Field observation of the initiation ceremony suggested how community rituals are sites of contest and change. The scarcely available indigenous scholarship on the ritual of *monshwo* (Senapati 2008; Bordoloi 2014) notes different initiation rituals followed for male and female infants. These are as follows-

a) In the ritual initiation ceremony of male infants, five arrows along with a bow are brought in. Four arrows are shot in the four directions through the hands of the newborn male child. The fifth arrow is shot towards the sky and both mother and child are blessed by the elders for the child to be a useful man to the community in future. The child is told-

*'bupaa, tur ron xodaai baahiro'* (your battle will always be outside). The invited *jelas* seated in the courtyard then take the male infants from their mothers and carry out a singing and dancing ritual with them, welcoming the kids into the tribe.

b) In the ritual initiation ceremony of female infants, the female child is given a *kaasi*-a traditional sickle and a wheel containing a cotton-lit lamp. She is then blessed to be a useful woman to the community in future. She is told- *'tur ron ghorotei'* (your battle will be at home). The womenfolk, the *haaris*, carry the female infants to the inside of the *borghor* and perform the singing and dancing ritual inside.

The symbolism of *'ron'* or battle mentioned in these texts seem to be a metaphor suggesting the gendered domains of social life and the associated struggle for the newborns as they grow up to be women and men in the community. In a way, it seemed to suggest the formal way in which the community perceives gender. That *'battle'* for men is always outside implies that the formal domain of operation for men is public. That *'battle'* for women is always at home implies that the formal domain of operation for women is private. Thus, the metaphor of *'ron'* seemed to symbolically express the traditional perception of dichotomy between public and private among the Tiwas, wherein the men dominate the public and the women dominate the private (discussed in previous chapter).

However, these ritual prescriptions were observed to be bent through different settings during the fieldwork of this research. To elaborate, in the *monshwo* of *Madur kul* observed in February 2019, the male infants were swayed gently and blessed by the *borjela* and other elderly male members in the courtyard while Podumi and other *haaris* took the female infants inside the *borghor* and blessed them by an act of singing and dancing. The infants however were not given any physical symbols or objects like an arrow or sickle or wheel, nor were they told the phrases *'tur ron bahiro'* (your battle will always be outside) or *'tur ron ghorote'* (your battle will be at home) indicating their formal initiation to a gendered social life in the community.

The *monshwo* of *Amshi kul* observed in February 2022 showed a different pattern in the ritual initiation of the infants. Common blessings were imparted to both male and female infants and their respective mothers during the ceremony. During the blessings, both male and female infants were first swayed by the *borjela* and other elderly male members who prayed and danced to the chants of traditional *laali hilaali geet* (Tiwa traditional folk song



sung on multiple occasions of ritual and social importance) sung by themselves. The infants (both male and female) were then handed over to the elderly womenfolk including the *haaris* who also swayed the infants while singing and dancing to the tunes of *godalboriya geet* (traditional Tiwa folk songs sung during merry gatherings, usually sexual and erotic in nature). The act of singing, dancing and blessing by the elderly womenfolk including the invited *haaris* of different *kuls* was carried out towards the periphery of the courtyard, nearer to the cooking area where most of the other women from the *kul* were also sitting. Here also, no physical symbols or objects were given to the infants and no distinction was followed in initiating the boys and the girls.

And yet one can argue that *monshwo* ritual is a gendered ritual in terms of practice. It is at least so in terms of the role of the ritual specialists in the ceremony and also in terms of division of physical (and hence symbolic) space between male and female members of the *kul*. However, gender demarcation viz-a-viz initiation or in terms of formally declaring the role for the newborns as mentioned in the textual descriptions is somewhat arbitrary in practice. The gender demarcation of inside-outside is prescribed in terms of ritual roles but these were not necessarily followed while initiating new born members to the tribe as mentioned in available literature.

It was also noted during the field that the ritual practices may have undergone shifts and changes through time where certain ritual prescriptions have been discarded or modified according to the convenience of the community. For instance, according to respondents from the field, *monshwo* also used to be a formal common naming ritual for the new born children. The *jelas* and *haaris* of the *khel* used to dance with infants of the host *kul* in a common ceremony. As they would cry, the '*jela bhakat*' (elderly members seated in the courtyard during the ceremony) would whisper a name in the ears of the young ones. As the crying would stop, the names would be publicly announced. Respondents opined that this practice has now stopped as most of the parents name their child immediately after birth. However, the practice of common initiation ceremony is still strictly followed.

During a casual conversation in the *borghor* premises on the day of the ritual, Podumi *haari* shared,

“Aago dinot iyaate bhokote boojelaai kesuwaa naam disile. Kesuwaa kulaat loi nosuwaai thake nosuwaai thake. Nosuwaute nosuwaute kesuwaai kaande hoi, titiya jelaai bhokote kesuwaa kaanote naam eta koi diye. Kesuwaa konda bondho hoi jaai. Titiya jelaai bhokote naamtu xomaajot daangoke koi xeitu naameye koyi dhoyi khabo aaxeebaad diye. Ajikali kesuwaa naam ghowote di diye maake baapeke. Teu onusthaanot bhokot jelaar aaxeebaad tu paai aa.”

(In older times *jela-bhokot* (the elderly members) used to do the naming of the child. They would take the child on their lap and make them dance. When the child cried from the dancing, the *jela-bhokot* would whisper a name in the child’s ears. The child then stopped crying, and the *jela-bhokot* would formally announce the name in front of everyone present and also bless the child to earn his living using that name. These days parents name their child at birth only. Still, it is good that in the ceremony the child at least receives the blessings of *bhokot-jela*.)

-Podumi Patar, 60, Haari of Madur *kul*, during conversation in *borghor* of Madur *kul*

Thus, from the above observations it is clear that the community ritual of *monshwo* can be a site to understand how the prescribed ritual demarcation of public and private for male and female infants is not strictly followed. It is ambiguous, leaving a lot of room for modification of rules and also for the boundaries of hierarchy to be pushed and gendered negotiations to get actualised. This is not to say that gender hierarchies and demarcation of the public-private do not exist in the ritual space or in the community in general. It is just that the ways in which these get manifested are rather ambiguous.

Podumi further went on to say,

*Xidina paa kesuwaye maakoye suwaa nathake aa. Ama bhago eitu khub dorkari kormo jaaniso maa, monshwo holihe maake kesuwaai oxous kheda jaai. Titiyahe xi xomaajo kaam subaa paaye aa. Noholi aamao suwaa thaaki jabo beleg kulot koyeebo dhoyeebo nuwawong aa.”*

(From that day onwards, the mother is no more impure. It is an important task for us you know, only through *monshwo* the impurity of mother and child is gone. Then only she can touch the work of society. Else we also remain polluted and cannot do any chores in other *kuls*.)

-Podumi Patar, 60, Haari of Madur *kul*, during conversation in *borghor* of Madur *kul*

It was understood through this statement of Podumi that the importance of purity and impurity among the Plains Tiwas is immense, and that *monshwo* also stresses on the purity of the woman for her to be able to resume her socially engagements in the community. The ritual role assigned by the tribe and the notion of purity associated with it is also observed to be internalised.

#### **5.4.2. Songs of *monshwo*: The symbolism of ‘*laali hilaali*’ and ‘*godalboriya*’**

The collective performance of songs and the collective rhythm of the dance that commenced simultaneously were the most dynamic features of the ritual of *monshwo*. The experience of observing it was also one of the highlights of the fieldwork carried out for this research.

As observed in the field, songs are an integral part of *monshwo*. The content of these songs ranges from origin myths and legends of the tribe to the symbolic expression of desire and sexuality to claiming their identity as Lalungs or Tiwas using the allusion of the origin mother. During the *monshwo* ceremony of the Amshi *kul* it was observed that the song sung in the courtyard by the elderly menfolk to the newborns inspired a haunting sense of awe. It was a long lore that sounded like prayer. Dr. Bidyut Bikash Senapati, Tiwa scholar and my contact person in the field explained that these prayer-like songs are called *monshwo geet* as they are sung in the ritual of *monshwo*, and these are nothing but a variation of the *Laali Hilali geet*, the traditional folk songs of the Tiwas. The variation was observed to be only in terms of tune and not in terms of content. All these songs allude to the origin myth and characteristics of Tiwa-Lalung people. According to the origin myth, Laali, Hilali and Laai were three sisters of which Laai, the youngest one, is the original mother of the Tiwas or the Lalungs.

The song that was observed to be sung during the ritual in both Amshi and Madur *kul* and which we have already discussed in chapter two in the context of assertion of a Tiwa identity was-

*Laali hilali bapa laai mur pitadeu/laali hilaali o' laai/laali laang ghorote baapa biraali xumaale/saang tol molongi jaai/lalungor lolitong baapa laali hilaali/dehaanor lolitong puthi/aauxi nejanong baapa moraahi nejanong/haaloku nokorong khoti/lalunge gaaye gol baapa laali hilaali/dehaane gaaye gol o pod/podore murote baapa kirili paarile/saak oi lalungoni mod*

(Laali hilaali laai o' my father/laali hilaali laai/in my simple household the malice has entered/my house has now started to suffer/the lalung's sweet is laali hilaali/the *dehaan*'s sweet is books/I don't know their customs/I don't know their rituals/so I don't miss out on my farming/the lalung kept singing laali hilaali/the *dehaan* was singing 'pada' from his holy book/but immediately after he sang out loud/'hey lalungoni pour me some rice brew')

-song noted as sung by elderly men in the *monshwo* ritual dance

According to the members, this song was the '*monshwo 't guwa geet*' (songs to be sung in *monshwo* ceremony) and it has been sung on this occasion through generations, since the time of the ancestors. The act of singing songs containing origin myths in an initiation ceremony can be interpreted as initiating the child into the legacy and glory of the tribe, as commonly seen in most folk cultures, wherein expressing the joy of birth is blended with a sense of accountability to the community in terms of collectively chanting the origin myth. A repetitive allusion to the phrase '*laali hilali laai*' throughout the song can be seen as a constant reminder of who they are and where they come from, and can be interpreted as a constant allusion to the female figures of origin. The allusion however lies in this repetition and not in the actual content of the songs. From what was observed in the field, the content of these songs may vary according to context but the allusion remains constant-an ode to the origin female or the origin mother.

Laali Hilaali song is sung by the menfolk during the ceremony. As discussed earlier in chapter two, these songs, apart from alluding to the origin myth of the three sisters, also establish the ethnic distinction of the non-converted Tiwas through oral depictions.

On the other hand, the songs sung and performed by the womenfolk during the *monshwo* of Amshi *kul* were observed to be ones that alluded to desire and sexuality. Sometimes these were sung inside the *borghor* where the *haaris* danced with the female infants. Some other times women also sang these songs and danced in the courtyard area. Upon being asked, I was told that these songs are called '*laali laang geet*', also known as '*godalboriya*' songs. These songs were somewhat raw and sexual in nature, and the performance was also somewhat informal. A few examples of songs that were performed by the womenfolk of Amshi *kul* towards a corner of the courtyard-

*Aaji jaange jaange/kaali jaange jaange/pukhuri paarote jaang/pukhuri paarote maadoli singile/taake nu oi bisaari/jaange luki laai oi/lo ho hiloyaa laai*

(Today I go/tomorrow I go/I go to the bank of the pond/on the bank of the pond I lost my necklace/Searching for that I go again)

*Toye hera lahori oi/koilaaxor tokaari oi/dholaair kumoliya maat/dehaare bhitorote/ aase khola boma oi/pisoli poribi goi taat*

(O' you dear one/you're music from heaven/your voice is soft/inside the body/there are ups and downs/there you might slip)

These songs, the '*laali laang geet*' or '*godalboriya geet*' are sung by both men and women across contexts as expressions of love, desire and sexuality and widely used Tiwa folk songs. However, the singing and dancing to their tunes in the *borghor* premises by women from the community made it an interesting observation. While the gender demarcation in the ritual ceremony was clear, it was observed that women freely indulged in drinking, singing, dancing and joking in the premises. As observed, they also spontaneously chose the content of the songs. Presence of agency was observed among women within the *borghor* premises; however, it was not in direct conflict with the rituals, rather agency could be seen as exercised through the ritual itself.

Analysing the songs of the *monshwo* rituals proves to be significant as it provides an insight to the general perception of identity among the tribe members, and how the Tiwa woman is placed in their sense of belongingness to the tribe. Identity is asserted through rituals and ritual songs that allude to an origin female figure, but the 'space' of assertion of identity, both ritual and ethnic, is considered the domain of men. It is the Tiwa men who sing *laali hilaali*, a lore about their ethnic identity to the infants in a formal ritually occupied 'male' space, i.e., the courtyard. The *haari*, though occupying a formal ritual position, and at times present in the courtyard during the singing and performance of *laali hilaali*, eventually either joins the invited *haaris* in the inside of the *borghor* or the womenfolk in the somewhat informal corner of the courtyard for the *godalboriya* songs. She thus constantly navigates through the formal and informal public premises of the *borghor*, all the while holding her formal position within the private domain, i.e., in the inside of the *borghor*. It is through these navigation and transgression of the layered boundaries of the two domains that her role as a *haari* gets actualised. Unlike the *jelas* who sing *laali hilaali* of ethnic belongingness in a formal ritual space- the courtyard, the

essence of belongingness of the *haari* can be felt in her mobility through boundaries, in other words, through the actualisation of her ritual role.

#### **5.4.3. *Monshwo*: A site of ritual continuity and contest**

As discussed in the previous chapter, the *borghor* is the locus of Tiwa kinship and *monshwo* or the initiation ceremony in the *borghor* premises gives a specific insight about how the Tiwas assign immense significance to kinship and community life. That the new members are initiated into the *kul* together through the *borghor* also implies their initiation to a kinship bond, and a belief system that recognises the mother as the source and their own origin as a *mahari*. *Monshwo* thus affirms a formal linkage to the mother, i.e., of tracing back origin to the same womb.

Field observations suggest that *monshwo* is a ritual ceremony that primarily involves women, and understandably so since it is a ritual that involves birth. As a ritual ceremony the *monshwo* formally recognises the presence of women in the community. Men are invited and they take active part in the ceremony. Apart from the practices of singing, dancing and merrymaking, women were seen carrying out significant roles like guiding through the rituals and preparing ritual feast; the two most significant were the role of *haari* and that of the community cooks. As the female ritual specialist, the *haari* had formal access to the inside of the *borghor* and she was seen as one of the two primary people preparing offerings, praying to the clan gods, goddesses and ancestors and curating blessings for the newborns during the rituals inside the *borghor*. As community cooks for the *monshwo* ceremony, women also formally prepared the sacred food for the new mothers as well as for all the members of the community. The role of women as community cooks is a significant one as Assamese-Hindu women are usually not allowed to cook food or prepare ritual feast for social gatherings because of the sanskritised notions of purity and pollution.

Among the Plains Tiwas, drinking is socially acceptable for both men and women alike, and drinking traditional brew is a very important part of any religious event. During *monshwo* also, men and women were observed socially drinking the traditional brew both in formal and informal setting. Jokes and informal conversations among members, both male and female, were commonly observed throughout the ritual. The traditional brew was served as the *monshwo* prayers commenced and the elders took the infants for a round of

ritual dancing. The act of ritual dancing by the elderly men with the infants in their arms as some others sat and chanted long prayers in the form of *laali hilaali geet* was a different experience gained through fieldwork. The language of these chants was not Assamese and neither was it purely Tiwa. To me while witnessing the act as the researcher, the haunting tone of the chants did inspire a sense of awe and wonder, as it put into perspective Geertz's (1973) explanation of culture and rituals in which the dichotomy underlying a thinking theorist and an acting actor is simultaneously affirmed and resolved.

The '*monshwo*' is followed by '*korom*' the next day.

### **5.5. *Korom*: Death ritual of sacrifice, ancestral bonds and kinship connection**

*Korom*, the community death ritual, is annually carried out by a *kul* in its *borghor* premises. Each *kul* carries out a common *korom* ritual for their dead kin in their respective *borghor*. It is a ceremony through which the *kul* members bid final goodbye to their dead kins and place them in the *borghor* along with the ancestors. In a similar manner to *monshwo*, a date, usually within the Assamese months of Magh-Phagun (mid-January-mid March) is fixed by the *haari* and *ghorjela* of the host *kul* as per convenience of the *kul* members whose relatives have died within the said year. The *haari* prepares rice brew and summons the ritual specialists from other *kuls*. The duty of the *ghorjela* is to physically invite them. The *korom* ritual is usually observed on the following day of the *monshwo* ritual.

For the English year 2019, for Maadur *kul*, the '*korom*' was carried out for seven members who had passed away last year. Amshi *kul* on the other hand had three members whose common ritual farewell was being arranged for the English year 2022.

As mentioned before, the *borghor* of a *kul* is established in the household premises of one of the member families. For their *korom* ritual, the entire space of the event is demarcated into three spaces- the inside of the *borghor*, the common courtyard shared by the *borghor* and the host family and the backyard of the residential premises. The ritual of *monshwo* and *korom* are carried out on consecutive days and on both days the courtyard of the *borghor* is occupied by the *borjela* of the *khel* and the *jelas* of the seven *kuls* who constitute the invited menfolk.

Inside the *borghor* the *haari* begins the day by lighting earthen lamps and worshipping the *kul* gods, goddesses and ancestors. She also prepares the ritual offerings to be made in the courtyard- betelnut, basil leaves, rice water and plantain leaves.

The *haari* and the *ghorjela* begin the courtyard rituals by greeting the *jelas* from *khel* with a *xewa* (a social gesture of welcoming guests) and explain to them the purpose of the meet in a ceremonial manner. The *borjela* and the *jelas*, along with other senior and respected members of the host *kul* sit in the courtyard by forming a square, leaving an empty space for the prayers and offerings. The *borjela* sings a blessing for the entire *kul*, after which the invited *jelas* are offered seven sets of betel nuts each by the *haari*. The *ghorjela* pours them the sacred alcohol i.e. the traditional rice brew prepared by the *haari* in vessels made of plantain stems.

The courtyard is ritually important, as it temporarily embodies the character of the inside of the *borghor* during the time when the sacred killing of the *korom* ritual is performed. This information was procured from some of the elderly members during the day of the ritual. According to them, since the size of the sacrifice is huge and it always has the possibility of getting messy, the courtyard is symbolically accepted as the inside of the *borghor*. It is why the courtyard is treated as extremely sacred during the course of the ritual.

The ceremonial sacrifice or ritual killing is carried out by the *ghorjela* accompanied by the *haari* in the courtyard after due permission from the community elders seated across the courtyard. It is an elaborate ritual in which a temporary '*deuxaal*', or place of worship is set up in the center of the courtyard using bamboo and white threads. Upon being asked, some other respondents said that this arrangement is followed to avoid making the inside of the *borghor* messy with blood and also to make all the kins part of the sacrifice.

It suggests that the idea of pollution works differently among Tiwas when they demarcate the space of sacrifice than among the Vaishnavaites who would complete any kind of animal slaughter.

During *korom*, the role of the *haari* in the courtyard is a very important one. She is the only woman allowed to take part in the ritual activities that are carried out in the courtyard.



Before proceeding to the sacrifice, the *haari* purifies the courtyard by sprinkling (holy) water on it while the *jelas* continue to sing prayers. The *haari* and the *ghorjela* then enter the *borghor* and pray to the *jaalaa*, the sacred weapon together, before it is carried out to the courtyard by the *jela*. The animal (an adult pig of medium to large size) is then brought to the courtyard and placed on the plantain leaves spread by the *haari*. She then places a betelnut, a few basil leaves and rice on the heart of the animal. The sounds of the prayers heighten as the *jela* of the host *kul* carries out the sacrifice. The *jela* uses the weapon only for a single stroke, asks for mercy from the animal before taking its life, and prays to the *kul* Gods and ancestors to accept the offering. The *haari* is present by *ghorjela's* side throughout the process of sacrifice and chants prayers for peaceful passing of the soul of the animal. She cleans the space after the ritual.

Haari's presence during the sacrifice and her chanting of mantras underlies the significance of her role alongside that of a Jela.

#### **5.5.1. The 'giyaati'**

As observed during fieldwork of the rituals, apart from the *haari* and the *ghorjela*, there is another ritual position that is indispensable for the *korom* ritual. It is the position of *giyaati* of the *kul*. 'Giyaati' literally translates to 'kin' in Assamese. The Tiwas believe that it is only a *giyaati* or kin who can prepare a member for their final journey to the unknown. There are two members from each *kul*, a man and a woman, who are assigned the role of *giyaati* in the *kul*. The primary task of the *giyaati* is to prepare a dead member for their final journey- from giving the dead member the final ritual bath to dressing them up one last time to cooking and feeding the final meal to accompanying them to the *maakor* or the community cremation ground to witnessing the final moments of the member becoming one with earth- the role of the *giyaati* is pivotal. The Tiwas therefore treat the *giyaatis* with utmost respect and trust. The role of the male and female *giyaati* are however differently defined. For the *korom* ritual, the family of a dead member has to send out a formal invitation to both the *giyaati* accompanied by betelnut, traditional brew and a piece of new cloth requesting them to render their sacred service to the dead. On the day of *korom*, both the *giyaati* are together given a ritual bath by all of the community members in one corner of the courtyard.

The bathing ceremony was carried out in public view. The difference of gender could be seen as getting dissolved here as the man and the woman were bathed side by side by the members. Upon being asked, the members said that since they were from the same *kul*, the two are actually considered brother and sister. It was also observed that the bathing ritual, although formal, was a light-hearted affair where most members were seen singing and dancing to the tunes of traditional Tiwa folk songs as the *giyaati* were being bathed with the holy paste of turmeric and black lentil. This act also provided an understanding of how the community members perceive the event of death. The Tiwas do not believe in dissociation from one's community even after death. While the community members bid them a final farewell through a ritual, a *giyaati* is thus assigned who takes care of the cooking the final meal and delivering it to the *maakor*, the traditional cremation ground of the community where the dead member is thought to be united at peace with their ancestors.

It was interesting to see how all things sacred inside the *borghor* was handled by the *haari* but she refrained from cooking the ritual meal for the dead. She and the other *haaris* also did not accompany the male *giyaati* and womenfolk who went to the '*maakor*' (the sacred cremation ground at the end of the village used to carry out the last rites of the dead) to offer the cooked meal to the deceased. It is interesting how the sacred food for the community members is cooked by male members from the *khel* but the sacred food for the dead is specially cooked by the female *giyaati* inside the *borghor*. The *haari* also supervises the community cooking, though unlike during *monshwo*, for *korom* the actual cooking is carried out by the male kins.

### **5.5.2 The *korom* as a site of actualising agency through ritual space**

Observing Podumi *haari* during *korom* was a task, as she was not placed in a single place. She, along with the *ghorjela* of her *kul* was constantly moving around the courtyard. Interestingly, it was observed that Podumi *haari* was the only woman accessing and navigating through all the spaces involving the event. She was present in the inside of the *borghor* supervising the female *giyaati*'s ritual cooking, she was present in the courtyard accompanying the *ghorjela* in the sacrifice and she was also present in the peripheral area of the courtyard to supervise the ritual feast being cooked by male members. It is through this presence of hers across spaces that her role as the female ritual specialist could be seen as getting actualised.

Kamali, the *haari* of Amshi *kul*, was a younger *haari* and was considerably new to her vocation. She was addressed as a '*xoru suwali*' (a loving term used to mean 'the younger one') by the elder members of the *kul*, particularly by the elderly menfolk, and on multiple occasions her ritual actions were critically received by some members as being new to the role and hence to be somewhat inexperienced. To this she would respond, '*aami xikihe aasu, tohoti dangorxopaai he dekhuai diba laage*' (I'm only learning, you elders should be the ones to show me). However, before and after the ritual sacrifice, as I observed her moving through and around the courtyard and finally sitting alongside the elderly men during the time of ritual prayer to the ancestors, an act that is outside of ritual prescriptions for the role of a *haari*, I saw how her role as the female ritual specialist got actualised among the group of elderly male ritual specialists. It is how Kamali reclaimed her ritual position as the *haari*, irrespective of her relatively young age or lack of enough experience as judged by the elderly male members of her *kul* and her *khel*.

In the context of this research, it is important to critically evaluate the idea of sacred and profane, purity and pollution introduced to the sociology of religion by classical thinkers like Durkheim (1912).

Part of this Durkheimian theory of religion and religious practices seemed to get manifested as I witnessed the ritual activities during the Korom ritual in Bohgaon/Bhotiyonikusi and Ujonikusi. As I observed how killing that is otherwise considered a profane action, when attributed a certain religious character and considered a sacred act is not killing anymore to the community but a sacred offering to the Gods and the ancestors, I also got an understanding of what constitutes real, reason and meaning for the members.

An important point that Durkheim makes with regard to sacredness is, sacredness is not merely a set of peculiar relationships between people and certain designated objects. It also initiates relationships of the designated groups of people with one another and sets them apart from others to whom they are not bound and who do not have the same relationship to the designated physical objects. In other words, sacred creates a hierarchy of social relations where, in some ways, the people who are designated to form a relationship with the sacred also become sacred and hence are raised above the others who are ordinary or profane.

Feminist scholars like Lehmann (1990) and Erikson (1992) have argued how the whole idea of what is sacred and profane or pure and polluted put forward by male positivist thinker like Durkheim (and even female anthropologists like Mary Douglas (1966) whose work was heavily influenced by Durkheimian ideas of purity) is imbued with the value bias of patriarchy, as it only means men who get to enter the realm of the sacred and exercise hierarchies on women who are thus considered profane and hence inferior. Going beyond such definitions of religion in terms of the sacred man and the profane woman, more contemporary feminist scholars of religion, particularly of the global south like Lughod (1986), Mahmood (2004), Avishai (2008) and Darwin (2018), have explored how women claim their space within the realm of the sacred by embracing religion and religiosity through their own reason. These scholars have argued how women use religion itself to transcend religious boundaries that are defined for them by society, and how they 'do' and 'redo' gender by 'doing' and 'redoing' religion.

In the context of this research, the *haari* does enjoy a significant ritual role in the community life of the Tiwas which gets materialised through the institution of the *borghor* as well as the community rituals. However, even within the formal ritual space that is gendered, it is through the 'doing' of religion that the *haari* claims her ritual authority. In the presence of a formal ritual hierarchy of roles consisting of the *ghorjela* and the *borjela*, of space consisting of the private i.e. the inside of the *borghor* and the public i.e. the courtyard, the actualisation of her role happens through transgression of these hierarchies, most of which is manifested in the ambiguity of practice.

Interestingly, the relationship of the community members with the Podumi and Kamali as ritual specialists was not of fear, though at times they did earn respect based on how well they knew their jobs. It was observed that community members did not hesitate to publicly scold a *haari* or a *jela* when the latter were unable to execute their role with poise. The members were also seen guiding their selected sacred figures viz-a-viz the correct ways of carrying out a certain ritual. Amid the formality of rituals, the informal nature of interactions between members and *haari-jela* was interesting to notice as opposed to the typically seen settings of religious rituals conducted by sacred figures in sanskritised as well as vernacular Hinduism like brahmin priests or *Vaishnav Bhokots*.

### 5.5.3. The *maakor*: A representation of indigeneity and sustainable ecological care

The *maakor* was an interesting place, both in terms of ritual significance and ecology. On the day of *korom*, as I visited the area with the other male and female community members who accompanied the male *giyaati* to offer the sacred meal to the dead ancestors, I saw that it was a vast green forest area of community land. It was a few kilometers away from the village and had a huge water body inside. There were separate spaces of cremation of members from each *kul*.

Interestingly, members narrated a story of how decades ago the district administration made multiple attempts to take over the land and make it a settlement of the neighboring fishing community (referred to as ‘*duum manuh*’ or ‘*SC manuh*’ by the Tiwa community members). The argument given by the administration was that the population of the fishing community was increasing and they needed the land to create new villages for the latter. However, the people from the Tiwa tribe came out together in protest and were finally able to retain the community land by arguing that it was their ancestral land, already occupied by and dedicated to their ancestors, and hence holds sacred value to them. Looking at the dense settlement nearby in the present time, it seemed like a reminiscence of the relationship between indigenous faiths and environment, and how indigenous knowledge system has played an important role in sustainable ecological care.

Involvement of womenfolk in the *maakor* was observed during the *korom* ritual of Madur *kul* as noted during fieldwork in 2019. As I accompanied the crowd who walked towards the *maakor* to offer the ritual meal (cooked by the female *giyaati* and carried to the *maakor* by the male *giyaati*), I witnessed and was encouraged to take part in the singing and dancing by the womenfolk of the *kul* to the tunes of *godalboriya geet*. Upon being asked, they claimed that it was to ward off evil spirits as they were proceeding to the *maakor* and also to ensure that the dead kins knew their way to the *maakor*. After the ritual meal was offered to the ancestors in the space designated to the Madur *kul*, the *kul* members, men and women, sat down in a circle and drank the traditional rice brew while singing *laali laang*. Upon being asked about the reason for carrying out such an act inside the campus of the *maakor*, some of the members lightly remarked that it is a way of letting the ancestors know that their living kin are well. Some others remarked that life is transitory and it is a good thing that their kin are now at peace with their ancestors.

Philosophically, the *maakor*, as well as the overall ritual of *korom*, a ritual related to death, can actually be interpreted as a reflection of how the Plains Tiwas perceive life. *Korom* can be seen as a way of binding the community together, creating a sense of belonging even after the death of a member. A member is literally united with the ancestors at death as among the Tiwas there is no tradition of bringing back anything of the dead from the *maakor*. A member is cremated strictly in the space designated for their *kul*. The heap of ashes of a *kul* in the *maakor* tend to provide an unspoken visual history of that *kul*. In the truest sense, the *maakor* is seen as the final resting place of a dead member whereby the idea of salvation is associated directly with a member being cremated alongside their ancestors. Apart from this, the *maakor* also gives out a subtle statement of being a gender inclusive space. The fact that the *maakor* is accessible to men and women alike sets it apart from the cremation grounds of other major sects of conservative Hinduism including neo-vaishnavism which traditionally restricts women from entering the cremation ground.

#### **5.6. Community rituals: Formal roles and informal belongingness**

As the rituals took their course, one could observe that there exist multiple spaces within the *borghor* premises, separated by ritual boundaries and yet at the same time bound by territorial informalities. The navigation of the *haari* through these boundaries makes her seem like an anchor buffering through spaces. In a way, the *haari* seems to be acting as the separating as well as binding variable of the spaces within the *borghor* premises in the *monshwo* as well as *korom* ritual. For instance, even within the formal space of the inside of the *borghor*, informality makes its way to the conversations among the women. The *haaris* seated inside the *borghor* would indulge in informal conversations that would revolve around personal lives, love and sexuality. Amid conversations when I casually asked the female *giyaati* (who was cooking the sacred food offering for the dead) why she did not marry, she shyly replied that she did not know how to read and write so had almost no prospects of marriage. To this Podumi *haari* (who was preparing the ingredients to be put in the food) responded in a light-hearted manner that the *giyaati* wasted her youth looking for a guy with a government job. She also said that the *giyaati* should have gone for a good farmer instead and that if the *giyaati* was really interested, Putuli could have helped her with letters to lovers as she did with others. The house broke into laughter upon hearing this. There was a light air of belongingness to the space they were occupying and the status they were enjoying. My conversations with the other *haaris* were also started on

an informal note, trying to blend the questions with the spirit of the house and intending not to make them conscious of the questions asked. Conversations with these *haaris* established a fact about the religious reality of the community- the prescribed religious and ritual norms fluctuate according to the convenience of practice or in most cases, lack of it.

In a social structure that is patrilocal and patrilineal, choosing matrilocality in order to be a *haari* seems like a price that comes with added social challenges and constant negotiations with the patriarchal structure. Wisdom is a way through which her role gets actualised, and this wisdom is manifested through the nature of her presence in the *borghor* and in the community rituals. A wise *haari* is a one who belongs- both to her role as a female ritual specialist and to her *kul* or her tribe. However, what came out in field interviews and observations is that a wise *haari* is also someone who can transgress her way through the ritual boundaries and is accepted and revered by the community members ‘because’ of it. A *haari* who ‘knows’ is the ideal *haari* and she always actualises her role somewhere in between the ritually prescribed boundaries.

### **5.7. Shifts, continuities and implication on gender**

As discussed in the previous chapter, certain changes were observed in the structure of some of the *borghors* in terms of construction and religious symbols during the post-covid field visit in February 2022. As noted during the visit, the *borghor* of the Amshi *kul* was made into a concrete one with sponsorship from the Tiwa Autonomous Council (TAC) and it had an inevitable impact on how the community rituals were carried out from then onwards. For instance, with the construction of the concrete *borghor* the ceremonial cooking by the *giyaati* had to be done outside the *borghor* as the concrete place had no provision for carrying out cooking. It highlights an important point about how sacred space is fluid, and hence authority of the ritual specialist in charge is also fluid.

In an ideal condition, the entire process of ritual cooking for the dead kin would have been carried out in the ‘*bhitor mojiya*’ of the *borghor* by the female *giyaati* under the instructions of the *haari*. It would have been an exclusive female space, a space of various casual and informal conversations among these women. Instead, Kamali, the *haari* of the *kul* could be seen sitting outside the *borghor*, guiding and helping the *giyaati* in the cooking in a small *pakka* area adjacent to the wall of the *borghor*. The stove was observed to be a modern one, instead of the traditional mud hearth. Thus, what was once carried out

inside the *borghor* including the exclusive conversations among the *haaris* and the *giyaati*, most of which were informal in nature as observed inside the *borghor* of Madur *kul*, was now happening outside, thus changing the nature of conversations, and inevitably also the nature of interactions between power. The conversations that took place outside surrounding the cooking place were also informal, but it lacked the exclusivity of space as people were constantly passing by, either for betelnut or sometimes just to join the conversation. As a woman researcher observing this subtle process of change, I wondered if it would have been possible for Podumi *haari*, in such an open setting, to tease the *giyaati* of her *kul* about writing love letters to prospective suitors on the latter's behalf. What I also ended up wondering about was the mystery of invisibility and hence an exclusivity that was perhaps lost forever- both in terms of the ritual meal and also in terms of the enigma of a space occupied exclusively by female ritual specialists.

During the *korom* ritual of Amshi *kul*, the procession to the *maakor* had only a few members. I, along with the members, were driven to the *maakor* in a car while the male *giyaati* accompanied by two other male members walked carrying the ritual meal. Unlike Madur *kul*, no singing and dancing through the route or drinking inside the *maakor* was observed. As we entered, I noticed a Shiv Mandir at the entrance which was earlier not present. Upon being asked, one of the members said it was constructed around a year ago. Associating Lord Shiva with cremation ground is a Hindu practice. This was an interesting development as around the same time the newly constructed concrete *borghor* of the Amshi *kul* also witnessed the mounting of a photo of Lord Shiva on the entrance. While these simultaneous developments may be mutually exclusive, their presence in the socio-religious spaces of the tribe does make one wonder about the implications these developments would have on the ritual practices of the tribe and inevitably on the indigenous practice of the female ritual specialists.

## **5.8 Conclusion**

Though the two rituals are carried out in two consecutive days, the preparation for *monshwo* and *korom* requires months. The choice of time for performing *monshwo* and *korom* is also interesting. Usually, the Assamese month of *maagh-phagun* is the only time in the year when the people in the community are able to find some time to relax and rejoice post-harvest. A good harvest is a reason for good mood for the members of the community that is primarily agrarian. Perhaps it is for this reason that the annual *monshwo*



and *korom* become avenues for merry and joy rather than mourning, even if there is a ritual involving death.

Thus, the *borghor* is the prime institution around which the Tiwa religious life revolves. From the rituals of birth through that of marriage to the rituals of death, the *borghor* acts as the sacred space where the sanctity of the Tiwa religious life is observed. It is evident from the data that though the *jela* is the ceremonial head of the *borghor*, it is the *haari* who is operational in all the religious ceremonies.

Mario Aguilar (2000) has argued how religion as a social expression and culture as a unifying social factor, can be mediated and analytically understood through ritual as their common expression, and that it is through the closer examination of ritual forms, ritual expressions, and ritual performances that religion can be studied. Catherine Bell (1997) has written how anthropologists and sociologists have increasingly turned to ritual as a 'window' to the cultural dynamics by which people make and remake their worlds. She looks at ritualization as a strategic way of acting and explores how and why this way of acting differentiates itself from other practices. When analyzed as ritualization, acting ritually emerges as a particular cultural strategy of differentiation linked to particular social efforts and rooted in a distinctive interplay of the socialized body and the environment it structures. A feminist analysis of rituals can thus take into account what remains undocumented in religion and what culture seems to forget. In the specific context of the ritual universe of the Tiwas, the attempt of this chapter has been to analyse the community rituals from a feminist lens in order to bring out the nuances of a ritual role assigned to women, the dynamics of ritual boundaries and hierarchies in the community rituals, and how all of these aspects are shaped by the ambiguities of practice and in turn shape the agency of women with ritual status



**Figure: 5.1.** Scenes from *Monshwo* ritual of *Amshi kul*.



**Figure: 5.2.** Female *giyaatis*.





**Figure: 5.3.** Womenfolk dancing with infants during *Monshwo* ritual of *Amshi kul*.



**Figure: 5.4.** Scene from *Korom* ritual. *Haari* of *Amshi kul* sitting in the courtyard with *borjela* and the male elders of the *kul*.





**Figure: 5.5.** Clan elders seated at the courtyard for *korom* ritual



**Figure: 5.6.** A scene from the *monshwo* ritual





**Figure: 5.7.** Womenfolk seated towards the corner of the courtyard during ritual



**Figure: 5.8.** Haari of Maadur kul seated with male elders from the *khel* in the courtyard. Image from *korom* ritual.





**Figure: 5.9.** Womenfolk seated in the courtyard with *haari* and *giyaati*



**Figure: 5.10.** A scene from the *monshwo* ritual





**Figure: 5.11.** Womenfolk heading towards the *maakor* (cremation ground) during *korom* ritual of *Maadur kul*. Some women can be seen dancing



**Figure: 5.12.** A light moment shared by the *haaris* and the female *giyaati* inside the *borghor* during ritual cooking for ancestors.





**Figure: 5.13.** *Haari* of Maadur kul seated with male elders from the *khel* in the courtyard. Image from *korom* ritual.



**Figure: 5.14.** *Haari* of Maadur kul carrying out the *korom* ritual with male elders from the *khel* in the courtyard.





**Figure: 5.15.** Inside of the *borghor* during *korom* ritual.



**Figure: 5.16.** Women and menfolk offering ritual food to ancestors in the *maakor* (cremation ground) during *korom* ritual of *Maadur kul*





**Figure: 5.17.** Women and menfolk enjoying rice brew after offering ritual food to ancestors in the *maakor* (cremation ground) during *korom* ritual of *Maadur kul*