

# A Historical Perspective on the Material Culture of the Nocte Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh

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## Abstract

*This paper represents some aspects of historical study on the material culture of the Nocte tribe of Tirap district, Arunachal Pradesh. The Noctes are one of the major tribe of the state, inhabits in the eastern most part of India. The social organization of this tribe is based on chieftaincy. The object of this study is to examine the various problems, decisions and developments with the application of empirical study and method. The study is on historical analysis. A valuable data is gathered through field studies and interaction with the people of the community. Secondary sources are also referred to further authenticate the research work. This study is confined to Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh. In this paper, discussion is made with special reference to a settlement pattern and constructions of households of the tribe.*

*Key words: Historical, Material culture, Chieftaincy, Empirical, Settlement pattern, Household.*

## **Introduction**

The culture at conceptual has defined in numerous ways by various specialist including anthropologist, cult-urologist, sociologists, etc. *Manns* have define it “all that which is non-biological, and socially transmitted in a society, including artistic, social, ideological, and religious pattern of behavior, and the techniques for mastering the environment.”<sup>1</sup>

Emily & Lavender define culture “as sets of learned behavior and ideas of human beings acquired as member of society. Human beings use culture to adapt to and transform the world in which we live.”<sup>2</sup>

In fact, the material culture of the Nocte is developed and impressive arts, which plays an important role in their social life. In the pre-independence period, the Nocte were primarily depends on forest. The materials for house construction, handicrafts, firewood, fishing, preparation of rock salt and vegetables are usually acquired from the forest. Therefore, ecology played as the fundamental guiding factors as force in

the material culture of the Noctes. In the past, they used plates, bowl, carrying and storing baskets, cup and water containers which are made of bamboos and woods. Now a day, the use of these traditional articles are gradually decaying in most of the villages primarily which are situated nearby the town. They started using the modern articles, which are available in the market. Despite the advent of modern technology, some of the traditional materials of household are still used in almost all the Nocte villages. Thus, the ecology governed in the material culture of the Noctes.

### Settlement pattern and House construction

The settlement pattern of the Nocte is primarily linear and rectangular rural settlement. However, in some villages, circular and semi-circular rural settlement is also adopted. The settlement is compact as well as cluster. The dwelling houses are systematically arranged facing each other in both side of pathway. Villages are situated mostly in the slope hills. Some big villages have more than three hundred house populations, other have less than hundred households.

*Sahu* describes that “the Nocte house system that the houses are built at a height of four to twelve feet from ground. As the land is uneven and undulating, huge blocks of wood and wooden pillars have to be used to get a level floor. *Toko* leaves are used for thatching the roof. The thatch roof is slanting and drops down considerably and covers almost three- fourth of the wall and thus provides a protection to it.”<sup>3</sup>

In Nocte customs, every stages of house construction is marked by prescribed rituals, auspicious days and date, and prescribed directions for the whole structure and the rooms. The house structure faces east would be a good fortune for the family and it is believed that if the house faces south or north direction, some calamity would befall with family.

*Barua* describes that “omen is observed as usual as to which of the posts collected for the new house should be hauled first. It should, as a rule, be always in the direction of the east. Normally a male puff or a dog is brought for the ritual. If a puff or a dog is not available a cockerel is brought. At the site of the new house the hole for erecting the first post is dug to the desired dept. the puff or dog is taken round the compound and then brought to the spot where the hole was dug. The head of the animal is severed by the old man of the village with a prayer to the goddess earth and god above that the family has come to live there and they and their children’s children one generation after another be protected from all evil elements and grant prosperity and health so long they live there. The head of the animal is then dropped below in the hole over which the first post is erected and filled up with earth. The rest of the dog is thrown away. Alternatively, a cockerel is sacrificed placing its head in the same manner.”<sup>4</sup>

The housing system of the Nocte is very simple. The house is of a ‘*chang*’ type, comprised of normally four partitions, viz. *wakah*, *Thamthong*, *Tabnyong* and *Hatab*. The primary materials for housing are procured from the forest. However, if family felt shortest of any materials, they can approach to clan’s family

for seeking materials by giving a half bottle of rice beer juice, called '*juming*'. In the village, they live in cooperative and generosity to each other. All the required materials for house construction are arranged in advance because it becomes harder and light to carry. For instance, plunks are carved before four to five months. Palm leaf and bamboos collect in the month of September. The season of house construction is varies from one village to other but most of the village construct in the month between May to October. Besides, the size of house also differs from one household to another. In the early society, house was generally constructed in big size in order to accommodate large members. Unlike the commoner's house, chief house was very large and magnificent. The reason being that sometime a council meeting holds in chief's house therefore, it was built for suitability to accommodate large members. In addition to these, the house is decorated with skulls of various animals and birds. In Nocte society, there was custom to give head of animals or birds by individual hunter to the chief. Further, the head of animal is given to the chief even during community hunting. It is the sign of regard and respect to the chief. *Elwin* asserts that "the chief's houses are often very large, probably the largest in the whole of NEFA, and the Nocte and *Wanchos* use massive blocks and pillars of wood which some of them carve with fantastic designs."<sup>5</sup>

Now a day, house is built in medium size comprise of three to four compartments as the family becomes smaller. Among the Nocte society, the community constructs the village house without taking any charge. However, the owner arranges common feast for the party participated in the work, and serves rice beer throughout the construction.

When the season of house construction comes in the village, people become very active, as they keep quite busy in collection of materials. However, it may be hardship or tiresome, they enjoy of collecting plunks, bamboos, palm leaf and string of cane from the forest. During this season, the villagers hardly get times to take rest in the house because day after day invitation comes from different household for collection of materials. In the season, ten to fifteen-houses are constructed consecutively one after another. In the village, house construction is completed in three days however, in case of small village; it takes more because of less members. The house construction is mainly three stages, namely *humhakja*,\* *sumhoanja*\* and *humkholanja*\*.

It is worthy to note that small children are also participated directly or indirectly in the construction. Their main duty is to serve rice beer and passing thatch to the roof.

In the evening of day before construction, some girls visit to each household of village to inform for construction, called *bi-ngat* (informing). On the first day of construction; only the relatives of the owner are informed to pull down the existing house. During construction, the family takes shelter in one of their neighbour house. While dismantling of house, women and children are kept busy in collecting firewood for their own family. It seems like busied ants pulling a piece of dry leaf in and out in the crowd. When they

complete the demolition, new posts are erected in the same holes and keep continue their works until 4-5 pm in the evening.

On the second day called *sumhoanja*, some relatives along with clan's members are informed. That day, they left almost complete of construction, leaving the works of walls partition inside the house. In the early society, there was a man in each group who used to announce the second day of construction, called *sumbirak\**. However, this custom is not practice in the present context because the information is being already given by the girls.

The third day is called *humkholanja*, or the last day of construction. The day is for relatives to be informed to do the finishing works. They make an open platform in the entrance with splitting bamboos especially for the purpose like drying of paddy, millets, cloths and sitting.

*Sahu* asserts that “a typical Nocte house is of usual ‘Chang’ pattern consists of a ‘*Wakka*’ (the entrance room) and ‘*Hamnyu*’ (inner room) rectangle in shape.”<sup>6</sup> The former room serves the purpose of bedroom, living room and dining room especially for male members of the family. Similarly the inner room serves for female compartment.

In the house, floor is made of two layers, a lower part is laying small trees overlapping each other and the second layer is of splitting bamboos laid crossing or overlapping each other. The walls are also made of bamboos in the same style as in floor. The door is at each end and a passage about two feet wide down the middle in which fire lit on cold night. The smoke findings its way out as best it can in the absence of chimney or windows. The house is thatched with thatching a leaf of small palm, called ‘*Lo*’ in *Nocte*. The eaves reach almost near to the ground, which brought forward in half circles in front to fort a sort of verandah. Roof stands the front post, which elaborately decorated with skulls of animals. The arrangement of thatch is generally performed by village old men for which they are being given a piece of meat from the animal sacrificed for the common feast by the owner.

The occupation of the partitions in the Nocte house is divided for convenient of their living. *Tab-chha*, the entrance room is for the head of the family. The guest especially male members usually are welcome in the first room. They cannot enter inside freely. The second partition is *tab-nyong* ;( *compartment*) for oldest female of the family and thereafter the next room is *ha-tab* (compartment) for new bride and her husband. In between *tab-chha* and *tab-nyong*, sub-partition arrange for pounding’, called *thamthong* (*pounding compartment*). Further, unmarried sons and daughters occupy in the sub- partition from *thamthong*. *Tesia* describes that there is a norm to enter the house, and is strictly followed among the Nocte. In the compartment of women, a stranger or man even the head of the family cannot visit.<sup>7</sup>

## Untimely house construction

An emergency house is constructed when fire accident or natural calamities is taken place in the village. In such case, the villagers voluntarily help the victim by donating the materials. There is a custom among the Nocte to cooperate the victim during any incident that take place in the village. Even the neighbouring villages also help the victim by contributing some materials and helping in the construction. No any formal invitation is waited during emergency rather they immediately rush to the spot. The villagers even furnish them like utensils, paddy seeds, local mats and cloths in this case. However, today the government, the NGOs, and individuals have extended a voluntary help to the victims. In such case the government provides an immediate relief both in cash as well as in kind.

**Case study:** *“Arson was taken place in Kaimai village on 5<sup>th</sup> April, 2007. In this incident, two houses were burnt down completely without dodging even a single article. Thereby the government was accordingly informed. An immediate relief was provided with food commodities along with some cloths and utensils to the victims equally. Besides, a case of rupees one thousand each was given to them. Apart from these; a Bazaar community and individuals have extended help to the victims in kind.”*

In the beginning of new settlement in the present village, the procurement of land was freed to every individual. There is no any norm to occupy land. Therefore, accordingly the ancestors occupied lands for their own jhum land as well as residential land. Their sons, grandsons, again inherited these lands and so on. There is no restriction to sell off any individual land within the family or village except the outsiders. In comparison to the commoners, chief possess large areas at his disposal since time immemorial. Thus, he helps the commoners by giving some parts of his land for jhum or residential land.

## Granary

*Sahu* describes that “the Nocte do not construct granary. They stored paddy and crops within the house.”<sup>8</sup> Contrary to these statements, a researcher failed to enquiry on how the Nocte coined the word ‘Pun’ if there was no granary in the society.

The ‘*pun*’<sup>9</sup> generally is constructed a little distance from the house in order to protect their grains from unpredictable fire accident. Its size is smaller than house. Ladder is not kept fix in the granary. It is constructed in such way that rats may not climb up to destroy grains. After eight to ten years, the thatch of both house and granary are replaced with new palm leaf, called ‘*Lo*’ in Nocte. There is no fixed time to change the roof; it depends on the condition of existing roof. The granary system is gradually declined in the present society because grains are now kept in the house itself. The reason being, agricultural products become less due to the change of occupation by the people from agriculture to business. Moreover, most of them have engaged in government service that they do not get enough time to look after their agriculture field. In short, prior to coming of education in the area, the people were solely engaged in agriculture fields, which have brought a large area under cultivation. It resulted, a large amount of production in the village, which raised the necessity of separate store house.

The number of household among the Nocte is varied from one village to another. In some villages like *Borduria* and *Kaimai*, situated at six km. from *Khonsa* (headquarter) of Tirap are having about 180-200 households whereas some are having only 30-50 households in the village. The reason of small village may be newly settlement in the recent past. Therefore, in case of the former, the settlement pattern is compact and unplanned whereas the latter are arranged in planned and disperse. The houses are constructed facing one house to another parting through narrow paths. It is linked in each house of the village. The settlement pattern of Nocte is in a cluster with the chief's house and the *paan* (dormitory) in a centrally located place. Prior to the fixation of their settlement they formally see the suitability of the location, which can accommodate availability of water and road accessibility.

In the early society, they used to observe certain rituals during house construction in order to appease evil spirits. On the first day of construction, a ritual- '*thong ram*' is performed by old man while erecting posts with blood of either chicken or kitten. They believe that it protects the family from all kinds of undesired incidents. However, in recent past this ritual is stopped in most of the villages with the influence of Christianity. Nevertheless, are still practiced by the non- Christian families. Another ritual observes on the last of construction, called *Hachhijun*\*

It is performed by old man with holding dry palm leaf in the left hand and fire in the right. He walks from back door to the entrance for three times with chanting which goes like '*Hachhi Joankha, niba songtong Ming Oh! Chhoan O!*' At the end, he throws out fire and leaf with shouting loudly from the entrance, followed by the crowd. The objective is to drive out the evil spirits from new house. In order to entry in new house, the owner arranges party inviting chief, priests, relatives, and elderly members of village. The day is termed as *Humwangja*\*. Thereafter, the family can enter with their belongings. They believe that until this ritual is observed the evil spirits would occupy it. Inaugural

In the post-independence society, many changes may have taken place in the features of house construction. In the recent time, the Govt. employees introduced a new culture to construct house on payment. The reason being that they have no times to stay longer in the village for collection of materials. Therefore, they negotiate the amount with the party (men who undertook house construction work) for over all expenditure, which includes collection of materials, leveling ground and construction. The amount may be ranged twenty thousand to twenty five thousand. Stories

With the advent of modernity in the areas, roads are now reaching even to the remotest villages, which lead to have a wider social contact with outsiders. It brought them drastic changes in their socio-cultural life. Of late, many affluent families have emerged in the village who build multi- stories building in the village. Therefore, rituals, which were observed in pre-independence society during house construction, are now not practiced. It is also because; the construction is now given to some experts' of outsiders who does not know about the native customs. Instead they observe '*puja*' while erecting pillars according to their own

customs. However, the villages which have converted into Christianity are constituted as primary members in the village church. It consists of Pastor, secretary, and deacons. These members have been invited on every occasion in the village to offer prayer. Thus, they initiate prayer just before beginning of the work of construction. ‘*Hachhijun*’ which observes at the end of the construction in the early society is also given up; instead church members offer prayer in accordance with Christian customs.

Today the govt. employees also receive a housing loan from the government and are availed by them. Accordingly, they have started to build a modern house in their own respective villages. Even this culture is more popular among the petty contractors. In the present context, most of the people prefer to build modern types of house that may be of semi-kacha or RCC. The government also provides CGI sheets to the villagers who live under ‘Below Poverty Line’ (BPL). The main agencies of this scheme are executed by Govt. departments namely DRDA, RWD, BDO, and from the MLAs Lad. It helps the rural dwellers to great extent by replacing thatch with CGI sheets.

In spite of modernity, the traditional house is inseparable from their life because while observing some rituals in the village, the priest pours drops of rice beer in the floor, which cannot be performed in the modern house. Besides, the old parents prefer to sleep in the ‘*chang*’ house. In addition to these, the Nocte usually sit round the hearth during winter. It is also used for drying of meats and fishes on fire. The evidence can notice in the town where the Nocte employees build small hut attaches to the Govt. quarter.

## Notes and References

1. R.S. Mann & K. Mann, Tribal culture and change (New Delhi: Mittal, 1989), p. 6
2. Emily A. Schultz & Robert. H Lavender, ed. Cultural Anthropology (California: Mainsfield, 1998), p. 3
3. Chatur Bhuj Sahu, Tribes of North-East India (New Delhi: Sarup & Son, 2002), p.54.
4. S.N. Barua, Tribes of Indo-Burma Border (New Delhi: Mittal, 1991), p. 174.
5. Verrier Elwin, A philosophy for NEFA (Itanagar: Directorate of Research, 1999), p.25.
- \* HUMHAKJA: the term has derived from two words, Hum–meaning house and Hakja means to demolish. So, it is day of demolishing the existing house. On this day, only some relatives are informing to help them.
- \* SUMHOANJA: it has two words of different meaning, ‘Sum’, which refers to a group, composed of mixed clans and ‘Hoanja’ means the day of construction.
- \* HUMKHOLANJA: ‘Hum’ means house and ‘Kholanja’ is the finishing day of construction.
- \* SUMBIRAK: it has two different meanings- ‘Sum’ means a group of mix clan and ‘Birak’ means to announce the day of house construction for particular group.
6. Sahu, Op. cit, p. 54.
7. N. Tesia (Interviewed), Hakhun village in Tirap District, 23.06.2006.
8. Sahu, Op. cit., p. 55.

- \* The term 'Pun' is a Nocte word which signifies a granary. It is built in a little distance from residential house in order to protect from unseen incident like fire.
- \* HACHHIJUN: The word has two meanings- 'Hachhi' that means haunted and 'Jun' means to purify. So, a literal meaning is to purify the haunted place.
- \* HUMWANGJA: Inaugural of new house. It is a kind of ritual when the owners first entry in new house. The members invited and observe 'Rangtam' (prayer) for well- being of the family.